

Buffalo Bill's Story by Special Contract!

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WILD BILL, THE DEAD-CENTER SHOT.

BY "BUFFALO BILL,"—(GEN. WM. F. CODY.)



"HOLD ON, BLACK JACK! I KNOW YOU AND HAVE YOU COVERED!" CRIED WILD BILL.

[Written for the DIME LIBRARY, by a special contract with the Author, Buffalo Bill.]

WILD BILL, The Dead-Center Shot; OR, Rio Grande Ralph, the Cowboy Chief.

A Story of Elmo's Bandit Band,

BY BUFFALO BILL,
(Gen. W. F. Cody.)

CHAPTER I.

WILD BILL.

"BUFFALO BILL, as I live!

"What on earth are you doing here, when I believed you five hundred miles away?"

The speaker sprung to his feet and warmly grasped my hand, while his left had involuntarily dropped upon his revolver, for I had touched him upon his shoulder as he sat in a Santa Fe gambling-den playing cards with three evil-faced Mexicans, from whom he was winning heavily.

The man was Wild Bill,* one of the most famous of bordermen, and whose name will long live in history as a hero of the plains.

"I am here to see you, Bill," was my reply to his question to me, and I added:

"Come, I wish to see you, so give up your game and go with me."

"I'll do it, pard," and turning to the three Mexicans, he continued:

"I'll have to give you a chance at me another time, pards, for now I must go."

The faces of the three Mexicans grew darker, their eyes glittered viciously, and I saw that there was trouble ahead.

"No, Senor Wild Bill, it was a game to rob us, for you win our moneys and now go away," said one of the Mexicans, speaking earnestly and in broken English.

"Yes, you must stay and play," another remarked, while the third added:

"Yes, you won our money, and you shall not go until we have satisfaction."

Wild Bill had heard the three of them in patience, his face not even changing color, but knowing him well, I felt that the Mexicans were making a mistake.

I looked around the saloon and saw that the Mexicans were numerous there, the Americans but few, and I dreaded a difficulty, especially against such odds, for no matter who the instigator, or whatever may be the cause of quarrel, Mexicans side with their countrymen, right or wrong.

"See here, pards, go a little slow, please, for you begged me to play with you, and I knew that you intended to cheat me, but I was on the watch."

"You played square for a few games, just to entrap me, allowing me to win to put me off my guard, then intending to run in your marked cards on me."

"I have won, and it is my pleasure to go with my friend, so do not be foolish enough to interfere."

"No, Wild Bill, you stay and play with us," and one of the Mexicans dropped his hand upon his revolver.

But, quick as was his action he faced a man whose quickness of drawing a weapon had saved his life a score of times, and ere he could run his eye along the barrel of his weapon, Wild Bill had thrust his forward and pulled trigger.

The Mexican dropped dead as the bullet crashed through his brain, and had Wild Bill wished to he could have killed his two companions with a couple of other shots; but instead he dealt one a blow with the revolver barrel and tripped the third man by a quick movement of one foot, thus flooring the three in a second of time.

"Come, pard, we will go now," he said coolly.

*J. B. Hickok was born in Illinois in 1837, and made a name as "The Boy Wolf-Killer" when but thirteen. Later, was in the Kansas Border War, then a scout in the U. S. Army in the Civil War, and afterward became noted as one of the most famous of the "Kings of the Border." He was the devoted friend of Buffalo Bill, and, a dead shot, an enemy to fear, tender-hearted as a woman, yet brave as a lion, he was indeed one of the remarkable men of the age.
—THE AUTHOR.

But a wild yell rung through the saloon, and the Mexicans were ready to avenge their fallen comrade.

But the revolvers of the Americans leaped from holsters also, and there followed a rattle of firearms, mingled with curses, groans, falls and rushing feet.

Only a moment it lasted and there had been a stampede of the Mexicans, the Americans holding their ground, while several dead men lay upon the floor and wounds had been given and received.

In the smoky atmosphere I saw Wild Bill standing, calm, upright and a grim smile upon his handsome face, while in each hand he held a revolver.

"Gentlemen, I thank you for standing by me so well—the fight was not of my seeking."

"Bury them decently, Brazos, and I'll pay the bill."

The last words were addressed to the keeper of the saloon, who, white-faced, yet full of grit, had kept his position through all.

"It's all right, Wild Bill, for they came here to rob you as I saw—I'll plant 'em in the Sudden Death Cemetery with no cards or tombstones," was the answer of Brazos, and turning to me, as though he considered the matter settled, Wild Bill said:

"Now, pard, I'll go with you."

We left the saloon together, Wild Bill as unmoved as though he had not just passed through a most deadly encounter in a fight for life.

CHAPTER II.

MY PARD'S PLEDGE.

LEAVING the saloon together, where I had so unexpectedly been a witness to a death-struggle, Wild Bill accompanied me to where I had put up in Santa Fe, while on the search for him, for a mission of importance had called him from his usual haunts to that part of the country.

Seated in my room I said to him:

"I am sorry, Bill, that my drawing you away from that crowd was the cause of a close call on your life, but then I found you in very bad company."

"Granted, pard; but don't you fret about the risk I ran, for do you know those three Mexicans were the very men that brought me to Santa Fe?"

"I thought it was an accidental and first meeting with them."

"Accidental, yes, but a second meeting, for I was sent here on their trail, they having held up a coach near Leavenworth and killed and robbed a United States paymaster."

"I had seen them in Leavenworth the day before, and felt sure they were the men, so I took their trail and followed them here."

"I found where they put up, and was looking for them when I met them in the saloon."

"I believe they suspected me, for they at once became most friendly and proposed a game, and they intended to kill me I am sure, and right glad was I to see you come in, old pard."

"Of course when the ball opened and the other Mexicans joined in, I made sure of my three men, and to-night we will go to their quarters and I'll stake big money we find the paymaster's money and valuables there; but now tell me why you are on my trail?"

"I have orders from the department commander to organize at the different frontier posts a picked band of scouts with a leader, ranging from five to fifteen men, as they may be needed, and as it will take me months to complete the work, I wish to ask you to go upon a trail for me."

"I'll do it, pard," was Wild Bill's prompt reply.

"It will be a red trail, I fear, Bill, one full of dangers and hardships, but the result will be of great importance to several persons, while the recompense will be small."

"Dash the pay, Bill, for I have played in big luck of late in several ventures, so am flush."

"Then you will undertake the work?"

"Yes."

"Without asking what it is?"

"You ask me to do it, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then I go for you, just as you would if I asked it of you."

"I'll tell you what it is then."

"Yes, for I suppose I must not start upon a fool's errand."

"You know Captain Adrian Valdos, I believe?"

"The Texan who got his appointment in the army for twice saving a command of soldiers from being massacred by Comanches?"

"Yes that is the man."

"Oh, yes, I know him well, Bill."

"I was Colonel Monastery's special guide on the occasion of his going to Fort D—in Texas, and his daughter and Captain Silvester and his wife accompanied him."

"We were in camp one night, and about to run into a Comanche ambush when we pulled out, when a Texan ranchero came up and warned the colonel of his danger and guided us by a secret pass he knew through the mountains to safety."

"Oh, yes, I remember that I and all of us, owed him our lives, Bill."

"He was made a lieutenant, and soon after was, for distinguished services, promoted by the President to a captaincy."

"I remember now, that he saved Colonel Marcus Monastery and his daughter, with their escort, from being captured and tortured by the Comanches, but I had forgotten that you were along, Wild Bill."

"Now he is stationed at the fort which Colonel Monastery commands, having requested the transfer from Texas, and it is said that he is engaged to Miss Marcelite Monastery, though that is not an assured fact."

"Well, he is a dashing, handsome fellow, Bill, and has plenty of money, I have heard."

"True," I answered, "but the trouble now is that nobody knows anything at all about him, his antecedents, or anything else."

"Plague his antecedents, pard, if he is the man he appears to be."

"So I would say, Wild Bill; but there are strange stories afloat about the captain, and I can tell you much which if true, would blacken the name of the gallant officer, and show that he is a disgrace to the uniform he wears."

At this Wild Bill gave a long whistle, and I continued:

"Now the captain may be wholly innocent, and what I intend to tell you, may be the work of his enemies; but if the rumors are true they should be known and the beautiful daughter of Colonel Monastery be saved from wrecking her life by marrying him."

"That's so, pard."

"When I learned what I did about him I went at once to the colonel, as I deemed it my duty to do, and he it was who asked me to undertake the work of a detective and hunt down these stories from the starting point."

"But my orders, as I told you, would prevent my doing so, and I proposed to the colonel that I should place the matter in your hands, and his reply was:

"The very man, and he will not regret it, I promise you."

"Do you go, Cody, and place the whole matter in Wild Bill's hands, for if he pledges you he will do it, I know that he will and you can give him the full charges against Captain Valdos as you and I know them."

"Such were his words, Wild Bill, and I have come here to find you."

"Go with me to where those three Mexicans put up, and upon my return I will give you my answer," said Wild Bill, thoughtfully.

I at once accompanied him to the place, and just as he had surmised, he found the largest part of the paymaster's money and valuables, and took possession of them as a special officer of the Government.

That night I placed in his hands the full charges against Captain Adrian Valdos, and after going over them most carefully, weighing every accusation with deliberation, and taking into consideration all the dangers he would have to encounter, he said in his decided way:

"Bill, old pard, I will do this for you, and also to save that lovely girl, if there be any truth in these stories against Captain Valdos, which I doubt."

"Let me tell you now, that though he once saved my life, if he is guilty of these

charges I will myself put the rope about his neck to hang him.

"You have my pledge, Buffalo Bill, and you know what the pledged word of Wild Bill means to you, old pard."

And thus it was that Wild Bill started upon a trail of wrong and mystery, the story of which I now give to my readers, commencing with the scenes that just brought Captain Adrian Valdos to the notice of the army, his valuable services that gained for him a commission, and the strange incidents that led up to the dark suspicions that his past life had not been all that it appeared, that there was a shadow of an implied life of crime hanging over him, which, if true, would blacken his name forever and lead him to a death of ignominy upon the gallows.

To prove these stories true or false was Wild Bill's pledge to me.

CHAPTER III.

THE UNKNOWN GUIDE.

IN the midst of a wild, mountainous country in the state of Texas, several years prior to the pledge given by Wild Bill to take a trail of mystery, to make or mar several human lives, a company of cavalry was encamped.

Acting under orders, to hunt down a band of Mexican outlaws who had lately crossed the Rio Grande into Texas and were raiding the ranches of American citizens, the troopers had followed their trail and driven them into a hiding-place in the mountain country, when, as night came on, worn out with their hard riding for several days, they had encamped early in the evening, their horses being almost completely dead beat.

The command consisted of the captain, two lieutenants, a surgeon and sixty men, all well mounted, armed and equipped, yet a small force to venture so far into the country of the fierce Comanches.

They all knew their danger, yet were glad to press on, believing that before long they must overtake the Mexican bandits they were pursuing, and whose trail showed that they were some thirty in number and not over a day's ride ahead of them, and traveling very slow, the latter fact proving that their horses were more nearly broken down than were those of the troopers.

Having selected his camp for the night, Captain Vernon Canfield, a handsome officer, young in years for the rank he held, at once threw his scouts out to guard the approaches to the encampment, and placed a line of sentinels also as an extra guard, realizing the danger of a sudden attack by Comanches, which, though none had yet been seen, might then be uncomfortably near them.

An early supper was disposed of and the men turned in early for a long rest, all except the scouts, sentinels and Captain Canfield himself, for he had insisted upon dividing the watches with his lieutenants.

Seated by the fire, which was built in a canyon, smoking his pipe and chatting with Surgeon Sprague, Captain Canfield suddenly arose to his feet as he saw a stranger appear before him like an apparition, coming from he knew not where.

The stranger was a tall man, broad-shouldered, splendidly formed and dressed in a buckskin suit; the leggins being stuck in the tops of his boots.

Upon his head was a Mexican sombrero richly embroidered in silver, and about his slender waist, half hiding his belt of arms, was a silk sash.

His face has as dark as a Mexican's, his hair black and worn long, and a long silken mustache, the ends curled upward, gave him a dashing, picturesque appearance.

A serape of gay colors hung from his shoulders in the graceful manner that the Mexicans wear them, and altogether he was a most striking, handsome, strange-looking person.

Raising his sombrero courteously, before Captain Canfield or Surgeon Sprague could utter a word, he said in a low, sweet-toned voice:

"May I ask if you, sir, are the commander of this troop?"

"I am, sir—Vernon Canfield, Captain United States Army at your service," was the prompt reply.

"You have a force, sir, only of three officers, five scouts and sixty soldiers?"

"You have counted them all, sir, so must know that they double your force of thirty men."

"I do not understand you, Captain Canfield?"

"Are you not the leader of the Mexican outlaws, come to make terms with me, now I have driven you up into the Comanche country?"

The stranger smiled, but answered:

"No sir, I am not a bandit; but permit me to introduce myself as Adrian Valdos, a Texan ranchero."

"A ranchero up in this country?"

"No, my ranch is far from here; but hearing that a party of soldiers had come here in pursuit of Mexican outlaws, I came on to serve them as guide, for I know this country well, and in fact, wished to extricate you from the danger into which the bandits have led you."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that the outlaws are friendly with the Comanches, in fact the guides are Comanche Indians, and they have led you into a trap."

"Then you are not one of those Mexican outlaws?"

The words were uttered partly as an assertion, partly as a question, and might or might not be taken offensively.

"No, sir, I am a Texan, and not a Mexican outlaw."

"How do you know that the Mexicans and Comanches are allies?"

"I have known it for years, sir, for once I was a captive of the Comanches, and also I have been a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws, so I know both well."

"Do you know where these Mexicans are now encamped?"

"I do, sir."

"Are there any Comanches near?"

"There are five hundred Comanches now surrounding your camp, sir."

"Ah! you know this?"

"I have been watching them for the past two hours."

"May I ask if they have seen the Mexicans?"

"They have, sir, and they attack you with their combined force at dawn."

"How did you pass my sentinels and enter my camp?"

"I came by a way where no sentinels were stationed, sir."

"And what was your real motive in coming to my camp?"

"I have told you, sir, that it was to save you and your command from death, to act as your guide."

"An unknown guide?" and Captain Canfield spoke in a tone of sarcasm.

CHAPTER IV.

TAKING THE RISK.

THE face of the stranger flushed at the words of Captain Canfield, but he replied quietly:

"Yes, sir, an unknown guide, yet I have no proof but my word that I wish to serve you, and I tell you frankly, that the outlaws led you into a trap, for this is what is called a blind valley, that is having no exit, save where you came in."

"With the narrow entrance blocked by an ambush, and the Indians firing down upon you from the cliffs there will be no hope for you whatever."

"Not according to your way of putting it, sir, and I tell you frankly that I wish to believe you are honest; but if there is no exit to this valley how did you enter it?"

"I came here, sir, with the aid of my lasso, for I lowered myself from yonder cliff, where my lariat still hangs."

"Ah! that is the way you dodged my scouts and sentinels?"

"My dear sir, your scouts do not know this country surely, for the place where they stand are not canyons, simply chasms that have no outlet, and the danger of an attack upon you need only be looked for from the way you came in, or from the tops of the cliffs, so you can realize how completely you are hemmed in."

"It would seem so from your description."

"What do you say, Sprague?"

The surgeon's reply came bluntly:

"If this man is a villain his face belies him."

"Wake up Cole and Lane, please, and ask them to come here."

The surgeon went off to obey and in a few minutes returned accompanied by the two lieutenants, who regarded the stranger with surprise.

In a few words Captain Canfield explained the situation to them, and asked their opinion.

"The man is one of the Mexican band, captain, and is here as a spy."

"I would not trust him on oath," was Lieutenant Cameron Cole's quick response.

"On the contrary, I believe he is what he says he is," was Lieutenant Lucas Lane's reply.

The stranger showed no emotion at hearing either of the rejoinders, nor even looked at Surgeon Sprague, who added:

"You are right, Lane, I would trust him."

"I do not say, Captain Canfield, so do as you please, for I know what the result will be to you and your men."

"But I would suggest that you order your scouts to push on from their positions and return and report the result, for it will take them but a short while to discover that this valley has not an exit through any of these canyons, only by way of the one that you came in."

"Lieutenant Cole, order the scouts to advance and report the result to me without delay."

The officer walked off to obey the order, and turning again to the stranger Captain Canfield asked:

"If we are entrapped, sir, and the trails guarded, may I ask how you expect to guide us to safety?"

"The way I came into the valley, sir, over the cliffs."

"You mean that we must climb the lasso to the cliff above?"

"Yes, sir."

"What could we do on foot in this country, surrounded by hostiles?"

"Your horses, sir, are worked down, as you know, and would be of no use in a flight; but with the fresh horses of the Indians you could not only escape, but, by running off their ponies leave them afoot, for they could not recover fresh ones under twenty-four hours."

"Your suggestion is a good one; but where are these Indian ponies?"

"As the Comanches could not ride in surrounding your camp, they went on foot, leaving their ponies in the valley several miles from here."

"And guarded?"

"There are about a dozen young bucks guarding them?"

"And you could guide us to their horses?"

"I could, sir, along a ridge I know is not guarded, for it begins at the cliff yonder where my lasso hangs."

"Following the ridge, it will lead us to a cliff, which we must also descend by means of a lasso, and then we are in the valley where the ponies are, and the braves who are encircling you are miles away."

"My idea is to climb the lariat with a number of others, which can be made fast to the pines there and lowered, thus enabling the men to make quick work of it, and also draw up your saddles, bridles and camp equipage."

"We can carry them along the ridge and lower them into the valley, where the ponies are."

"Your plan is certainly a good one, and you inspire me with confidence, in spite of appearances being against you."

"But we must lose our Mexicans, and the expedition prove a useless one."

"I am not so sure of that, Captain Canfield, for the outlaws must retreat from here by one of two passes, and when you have made the Comanches believe that you, glad to get away, have returned to the fort, you can divide your force in two commands and ambush each pass, for I will guide you to them, and you may be sure that the Mexicans will return across the Rio Grande as sure as they believe they can do so, for they would not have come up here had you not pressed them so closely."

"I am glad to hear that, at least; but here come the scouts."

The scouts came in with Lieutenant Cole.

and they were seen to be a hardy, brave lot of men, though they had gotten beyond their knowledge of the country, where they were wont to do scouting duty.

To the questions of Captain Canfield each one returned the same answer, save the man who guarded the canyon the troopers had entered the valley by, and he reported that he believed that there were Indians assembling on their trail.

The others reported that there was no exit from the canyons, the entrance to which they were guarding.

"I will take the risk, sir, and allow you to be our guide," said Captain Canfield, suddenly.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE REVOLVER'S MUZZLE.

THE firelight showed a smile flit over the face of the stranger, as Captain Canfield said that he would take the risk, and Lieutenant Cole said quickly:

"I would not trust him, Captain Canfield, for he is, I feel assured, an outlaw."

Unheeding the lieutenant's words the stranger remarked:

"I thank you, sir, for your confidence in me, for I admit that you have nothing but my word to cause you to trust me."

"It is now nine o'clock, sir, and if you will allow one of your men to climb the lariat and make the others fast, for if I went up alone you know I could escape, the rest of the men can be getting ready for the march."

"I tell you, Captain Canfield, we will be led into a trap by this man," urged Lieutenant Cole, excitedly.

"Either get us out of it, Mr. Cole, or allow me to do as I deem best unquestioned," curtly replied Captain Canfield, and the lieutenant walked off muttering something about his hanging the man if he was in command.

"Go up the lariat yourself, sir, and carry the others," said Captain Canfield, when they reached the cliff where the lasso of the stranger hung over the cliff.

With a bow at the confidence shown him the stranger seized the lasso and went up hand over hand in a way that showed he possessed great strength and endurance.

He had hung about his neck a dozen lassoes, and soon after his form, dimly seen against the sky, had disappeared over the cliff, the ends of those he carried began to drop in a row.

The men had been quickly awakened, and ordered to pack up their traps to carry, as the horses were to be left behind.

They obeyed in silence, wondering what such orders meant, and soon appeared at the bottom of the cliff carrying their saddles, bridles and outfits.

Others had gone up the lassoes to where the stranger awaited them, and they were soon drawing up the saddles, bridles, blankets and provisions.

It was the work of nearly two hours, but at last it was accomplished, and then the strange guide said:

"I am ready to lead the way now, sir."

"One minute. Captain Canfield?"

"Well, Cole?"

"If I seem to interfere, sir, it is for the interest of us all, and, as you are following the guidance of a man whom I suspect to be one of the outlaws, for he certainly looks it, may I suggest that he guide us at the revolver's muzzle?"

"How do you mean, Mr. Cole?"

"I mean that a man shall walk behind him with a cocked revolver, and if we are led into a trap let him be the first one to die."

Captain Canfield bit his lips and seemed about to make a sharp reply when the stranger said:

"Do as the lieutenant requests, Captain Canfield, for perhaps the men would feel more secure."

"As you suggest it, sir, I will myself keep by your side and it is useless to say that should you be treacherous, which I do not believe of you, it will be your death-knell the moment I have reason to doubt you?"

The guide bowed in silence and Captain Canfield stepping to his side he led the way through the darkness along the ridge.

It was an hour's march, laden as the men

were, to the point where the guide halted and said they must descend into a valley.

All was dark there, but the sound of horses moving about and cropping grass could be heard, and Captain Canfield asked:

"What is the height here?"

"Thirty feet, sir, and the lassoes can be made fast to these trees."

"Where are the Indian guards?"

"Do you see that break in the range, sir, relieved against the sky?"

"Yes."

"That is the pass into the valley, and half of the guards are there, the other being over a mile away where there is a pass out of the valley."

"All right, I will descend first with you."

The lassoes having had one end made fast to the stunted pines growing on the edge of the cliff, the captain and the strange guide swung themselves over and descended into the valley.

Then the scouts followed and were ordered to reconnoiter while the men and the traps were being lowered.

One lasso was left in place as the last man came down, and just then the scouts came back reporting that there must be hundreds of ponies in the valley as they were scattered all about, some staked out and others running loose.

The staked animals were quickly brought up and bridled and saddled, while others had the packs strapped on them.

Then the guide said:

"We can get upon the Indian guard, sir, by advancing on foot with the ponies, as though they were grazing near."

"To make a perfect success of it I would advise that no shot be fired, but that picked men rush in on the Indians and silently kill or capture them, and I will be glad to lead the party to make the attack."

"Give me your hand, guide, for I have perfect confidence in you, and you are no longer at the muzzle of a revolver in what you do," said Captain Canfield, frankly extending his hand to the stranger.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RETREAT.

IT had been with sad hearts that the soldiers had left their horses behind them, for for they were splendid animals and were like comrades to them.

Only the fact that they could no go further without several days' rest, and could not be carried with them the way the retreat had to be made, reconciled them in leaving them.

There were as many of the men who doubted the strange guide as those who trusted him, so that Lieutenant Cole had a large following in that respect; but when they found the Indian ponies and were again mounted, with some four hundred ponies to drive off with them, along with the traps and equipments of the Comanches left with their horses, Lieutenant Cole was about the only one, with perhaps two or three exceptions, who still had a belief that the stranger would prove treacherous.

When Captain Canfield said what he did, and offered his hand to the Texan, who had called himself Adrian Valdos, the lieutenant had hastened to remark:

"I still believe, Captain Canfield, that you are making a sad mistake."

"If I am, Lieutenant Cole, as commander of this expedition, I will be the most to suffer if there is a mistake made, while, if I fall, Lieutenant Lane, who ranks above you, will be in command, thus relieving you again from responsibility."

This cutting reply silenced Lieutenant Cole effectively, and Captain Canfield, picking out a dozen soldiers, along with the scouts, said:

"Now, Mr. Valdos, we will follow your lead to capture that Indian guard, and remember, men, no shot must be fired unless to save life."

"Lieutenant Lane, follow with the rest of the force, save those who are surrounding the herd of ponies to drive after us."

With this the strange guide led the way in the darkness, setting the example by not riding, but leading his horse, a spotted pony bearing the saddle and bridle of a chief.

As they came in closer under the shadows of the lofty range the darkness deepened,

but a glow ahead showed where a camp-fire was flickering and the guide whispered:

"That is the pass, sir, and we can get close upon them without being suspected."

Shielded by their ponies the men drew nearer and nearer to where the Comanches were lying to guard the pass out of the valley.

If it was as the strange guide had said, there were not over half a dozen Indians there, all, except one, being doubtless asleep.

"The one on guard stands yonder under the cliff, and I will try a ruse to get close to him," said the guide, and he took from the outfit on the pony he had appropriated the fantastic red bonnet of a chief and placed it upon his head.

Then mounting he rode on alone, leaving the captain and his men to still advance behind their ponies.

They saw him disappear under the shadow of the cliff, but did not see that an Indian guard stepped out in front of him, believing him to be a chief.

It was the guard's last act, for with a sudden bend of the body the guide grasped him by the throat, and quick as a flash a revolver fell upon his head with a crashing blow.

Releasing his grip upon the Indian's throat the form fell limp and unconscious to the ground, and the guide rode at once toward the glow of the fire visible among the rocks.

He motioned to Captain Canfield to come on with his men, and leaving two soldiers to hold the horses the others came quickly forward.

"Did you find a guard there?" whispered the captain.

"Yes, he is off duty forever," was the low response and the guide casting his war-bonnet across his saddle led the way to the camp among the rocks.

A few paces had they gone when they beheld a small fire, and around it lay half a dozen blanket enveloped forms, all apparently fast asleep.

The guide, Captain Canfield and the scouts moved ahead, the soldiers following, and with a bound they threw themselves upon the sleeping Indians, clutching at their throats to stifle an outcry, and endeavoring to use their knives.

The struggle was short, fierce and only the hard breathing of the combatants broke the silence; but the soldiers hastened up and aided in mastering the half-dozen redskins, who were quickly silenced forever, for an escape, or a war-cry might ruin all, so no mercy could be shown them.

There was a halt made there for the rest of the command to come up, and the ponies to be formed for a drive, the guide standing apart and waiting for all to be in readiness to start.

That he could now be trusted not a soul now doubted, unless it was Lieutenant Cole, who was still blinded by his prejudice against him.

But Captain Canfield now believed thoroughly in his strange guide, and when the troopers came up with the herd, he rode ahead with him, the stranger seeming to know the country perfectly in the darkness.

Thus was the retreat of the troopers begun, the long line winding, like a huge serpent, among the canyons and valleys of the mountains and leaving the Comanches surrounding their camp, deserted by all save the horses.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LIEUTENANT'S APOLOGY.

WHEN the day dawned the troopers, with their large herd of ponies, were fifteen miles away from the camp in the canyon which had so nearly proved fatal to them.

The strange guide was still leading, with Captain Canfield by his side, and as the daylight brightened over the range he said:

"A mile ahead is a valley where we can halt for breakfast, for there is good grass there and plenty of water."

"About the time we reach the camping-place the Comanches will be attacking your camp, so that we will rest an hour and still have a long start of them, while you know they will have only the Mexican outlaws' horses and those you left behind to pursue you with, and these ponies are fresh."

"Yes, Mr. Valdos, I feel no anxiety what-

ever now, for you have saved my command from massacre, that is certain; but I regret having to go back, even with our large capture of Indian ponies, without those Mexican outlaws."

"I do not think you will have to return without them; in fact, as I told you, there are but two trails back to the Rio Grande, and one of them they will take, so we can ambush them on both and capture the entire party."

"You think the Indians will not accompany them?"

"No more than a few as guides, I think."

"We are strong enough to fight a large force, though if the outlaws had an escort it would be harder to capture them."

"Granted, sir; but I do not believe that they will have an Indian guard, as they will believe you were satisfied with getting away and making a capture of their ponies, so will not further molest the Mexicans."

"Well, Mr. Valdos, I rely upon your opinion thoroughly, and I cannot tell you how much I owe to you for extricating us from the trap into which we had hastened."

"Do not speak of it, sir, for I acted only from a sense of duty in saving you from what I felt would end in a massacre when I saw you pass on into the mountains on the trail of the outlaws."

"You saw us pass then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you?"

"A day's ride from here, sir, hunting."

"And you have a ranch in this dangerous land, you said?"

"My ranch is some twenty miles from the trail you followed, sir, and from where I saw you."

"You certainly take big chances, Mr. Valdos, for no other ranch is near you?"

"It is a big risk, sir, and now and then I am the sufferer; but I like the wild life and its dangers, so dwell there with the half-dozen cowboys I keep on my ranch."

Captain Canfield gazed into the face of the Texan, for it was sunrise now and he saw it distinctly, and he had been an object of interest to the soldiers and scouts who also wished to have a good look at him by daylight.

He saw a face that was strikingly handsome and expressive, while in the large black eyes, fringed by the largest of lashes, there was a fascination that all must feel, when he looked upon them.

He certainly was a man far beyond the average, and what misfortune or sorrow had driven such a man to dwell in a wilderness, amid the deadliest dangers, no one could fathom.

They had now reached the valley where there was to be a halt made for breakfast, and as the men filed by where Captain Canfield stood with the guide, the men followed the example of Lieutenant Lane and saluted the Texan as well as their commander.

The large herd of ponies, and a splendid lot they were, at once began to crop the juicy grass, while, having placed a guard around them, the men dismounted and began to prepare breakfast, forgetting their fatigue in their joy at their escape, and all enthusiastic in their praise of the strange guide.

Lieutenant Lane at once rode up to the guide, and throwing himself from his saddle said:

"Allow me to thank you, sir, for your rescue of us and most masterly retreat."

The Texan grasped his hand warmly and replied:

"I am equally as glad to have served you, lieutenant, as you were to escape."

Lieutenant Cole had also drawn near, but as he said nothing to the guide, Captain Canfield remarked:

"Mr. Cole, do you not deem an apology due to our good friend there, as he has proven that your fears of treachery were without the slightest foundation?"

"I do owe him an apology, Captain Canfield, and will make it."

"But we took big chances in trusting a stranger and one who looks like a Mexican, as you must admit."

"I grant that he resembles a Mexican, yet we would have taken greater chances not to have followed his lead; but I felt sure that you would make the *amende honorable* when you saw that you had wronged him."

"No one is more willing to do so, sir," and stepping up to the Texan, Lieutenant Cole said:

"Guide, I wronged you, I find, in suspecting you of treachery, and I hope you will forget it; but you look like a Mexican, and in fact have, I detect, just the slightest accent in your English, so seeing you come into our camp it was but natural I should mistake you for an outlaw."

"Now, I guess, we can trust you."

Captain Canfield's looks darkened at the words of Lieutenant Cole, while he said in a low tone to Lieutenant Lane:

"By Jove! the apology is worse than if he had said nothing—Cole is an ass."

"Yes, an egregious ass; but listen."

The Texan had heard the words of Lieutenant Cole unmoved, and yet there was a brighter glance of the eye, as he replied in his gentle way:

"As for your opinion of me, Lieutenant Cole, I care nothing whatever, and, as your apology to me implied how you feel, I receive it with the indifference it deserves," and Adrian Valdos turned on his heel and was walking away, when Captain Canfield called out:

"Come, Valdos, you breakfast with us here."

"Cole meant well, only expressed himself badly."

"I expressed myself just as the guide has seen fit to understand it," was the lieutenant's quick response.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GUIDE'S DEMAND.

To the retort of Lieutenant Cole, Adrian Valdos made no response, while Captain Canfield and Lieutenant Lane both seemed deeply amazed at the conduct of their brother officer.

Ignoring the junior lieutenant, the guide turned to the captain and said:

"I thank you, sir, but I have my haversack of provisions on my saddle, for I left my own horse over under the mountain yonder, when I followed on your trail last evening, for on foot it is not half the distance we had to ride to get here."

"I'll send after your horse, Mr. Valdos, for you must breakfast with us."

"Thank you, I will, and I'll have time to go after him before breakfast is ready," and throwing himself upon the spotted pony, he rode rapidly away in the direction he had pointed out.

"He's gotten off now, and ten to one he ambushes us before nightfall," growled Lieutenant Cole.

"See here, Cole, what is the cause of your unmanly, if I may so express it, attack upon that man?" said Captain Canfield, warmly.

"I do not like your way of putting it, Captain Canfield; but I flatter myself I am a reader of human nature, and that man has treachery stamped upon every feature."

"On the contrary, I admire his face immensely, for it is manly, fearless, intelligent, yet a trifle sad," Lieutenant Lane remarked.

"I agree with you, Lane, it is a face to fascinate one, and he would be a dangerous fellow among the ladies," said Captain Canfield.

"Yes, the serpent fascinates the bird," sneered Lieutenant Cole.

"Well, Cole, he has saved us from certain death, and I wish you to treat him with the respect he deserves," sternly said the captain.

"Oh, I'll treat him all right; but see how he received my apology."

"But such an apology, Cole," laughed Lieutenant Lane.

"Well, I eased my own conscience by it, and so let it go; but I fear we will yet rue meeting our mysterious guide."

"I will bear the responsibility if we do, so let the matter drop," and Captain Canfield showed that he cared to hear no more upon the subject.

Just as breakfast was announced by the cook of the officers' mess the guide was seen returning leading a large jet-black horse, equipped with a superb Mexican saddle and bridle, mounted and adorned with solid silver.

A gay *serape* was rolled behind the cantele, there were saddle-pockets on either side,

with panther-skin covering, a lariat hung at the massive silver-encircled horn, and the knowing ones who glanced at the outfit whispered that there were hundreds of dollars in the saddle and bridle alone, while the horse was a magnificent animal.

"I found him in the little canyon where I had hemmed him in, and he has had plenty to eat and a rest since yesterday afternoon, so is good for a long trail," the Texan remarked to Captain Canfield, who, with others, were admiring the animal and his equipments.

The breakfast being ready they all fell to in earnest, having vigorous appetites, and under the influence of a hearty meal Lieutenant Cole offered the guide a cigar, which was, however, declined with thanks.

After breakfast was over the Texan led Captain Canfield to one side, and, taking a piece of paper from his pocket, rapidly sketched with his pencil a map of the position where they then were, the deserted camp over twenty miles away, and where lay the Indian village, with the two trails, one of which the Mexican outlaws must follow on their way back across the Rio Grande.

The map showed the skillful hand of an artist and was just what Captain Canfield most desired.

"You see, Captain Canfield, that we can all follow one trail to the first pass, and leaving a part of your force there, I can then lead the others to the second pass, which is twenty miles away."

"I see, sir."

"Having come by the trail we are now on, neither the Mexicans nor the Indians will suspect that we will double and go back to the passes, either one of which can be held by a small against a large force."

"Should the Indians even escort the Mexicans you can check them at the passes."

"And we can ambush them there?"

"Readily, sir, especially if the Indians do not come along, for you can get the Mexicans into a trap at either pass from which there is no escape."

"Then I leave the arrangement in your hands, Mr. Valdos, to place us as you deem best, and we are ready to start when you wish."

"It would be well, sir, to start at once, for should the Indians follow us here, and they doubtless will, discovering that our trail turned off toward the passes, they would at once know our intention; but should we hold on from here toward the fort, they will consider that we have gone thither."

"You are right, sir; but how far will we have to travel on the back trail before we turn back?"

"To the river marked here, sir, about a dozen miles away."

"We can cross and then keep on up the banks to a ford twenty miles above and there can recross to the pass."

"You plan well, Mr. Valdos, and, as I said before, you are our guide, so we follow your lead."

"I thank you, sir, for your confidence in me, especially as I came to you under very suspicious circumstances, and I really do not censure Lieutenant Cole for doubting me."

"But there is one thing I wish to ask of you, Captain Canfield, before I guide you to the passes."

"You have but to name your terms, Mr. Valdos."

"Pardon me, sir, but you misunderstand me, though perhaps it was my way of expressing myself."

"I do not wish pay for my services, though after all I do ask for terms," and the Texan seemed greatly embarrassed.

"Name your terms, Mr. Valdos, please."

"I ask, sir, in return for my services, that when your men fire upon the Mexicans they will be ordered not to kill the chief, and more, that you will *give him his freedom*," was the surprising request of the mysterious volunteer guide.

CHAPTER IX.

IN AMBUSH.

THAT Captain Canfield was surprised at the demand of the Texan there was no doubt, for his amazement was revealed in his handsome face.

He, however, expressed no surprise by words, but simply said:

"Let me understand it, Mr. Valdós, just as you make the request."

"I ask you, sir, in return for guiding you to the passes, where you are almost certain to ambush the returning Mexican outlaws, yes, and capture them, that you will allow me to take possession of the chief."

"To avenge yourself upon him for some wrong done you, may I ask?"

"Oh, no, sir, to set free."

"You wish to set free this hated outlaw chief?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you aware that it is Don Elmo, the Mexican?"

"I am, sir."

"A man who is known, from his red deeds, as 'The Butcher', 'The Merciless', and whom even the Mexicans call 'El Diablo'?"

"That is the man, sir."

Continuing somewhat warmly, the captain said:

"A man upon whose head there is a price set of five thousand dollars in gold."

"That reward, sir, I will myself pay to your men if you give him into my keeping."

"You certainly make a most surprising demand, Mr. Valdós."

"I ask for not another one of the band, sir; in fact, will volunteer to guide you across the Rio Grande by night to the stronghold of the outlaws, where you can capture a dozen more of the band, with quantities of booty, ponies and their complete outfit; but I do ask for the pardon of this man Don Elmo the Mexican Marauder."

"And I cannot understand your pleading for the life of such a man, so must decline to grant your demand, Mr. Valdós."

"I am sorry, sir, for by doing so you will wipe out a band of outlaws, all save their chief."

"Can I not do so and capture him also?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I will not guide you to the passes."

"Ah! that is it; but suppose I can find them, for I have here your map."

"Captain Canfield, I fully appreciate your desire to capture this man, and he deserves death, I admit, but I will not see him go into a trap that will bring him to the gallows any more than I would allow you and your men to be ambushed by your foes."

Captain Canfield saw that the guide was in earnest in what he said, and yet he did not grow angry, simply remarking:

"You have some deep motive for this, Valdós?"

"I have, sir."

"What is it?"

"To save Elmo, as I said, sir."

"You will not tell me your real motive, then?"

"Yes, Captain Canfield, I will, for you trusted me in spite of the appearance of treachery on my part, and you are a man I admire, so I will tell you that in several instances I am indebted to this same Elmo for saving my life, when I was a prisoner to the Mexican outlaws, and also a captive to the Indians."

"It is true that I once did him a service, but he has returned it, and I admit frankly to you in confidence that, but for his friendship for me, I could not dwell as I do so far from protection."

"Now, sir, you know why I ask the life of Elmo, the Mexican at your hands."

"Yes, and I appreciate your confidence and will respect it; and owing so much to you as I do, for your rescue of my men and myself from what would have been certain death, I will grant your demand, and if Elmo, the Mexican is captured, he shall be turned over to you, for with his band wiped out, and stronghold captured, for I shall hold you to your promise to guide me to it, he will be no longer dangerous."

"I thank you, sir, and I sincerely hope that he can be convinced that his career of outlawry must end," was the response of the guide, who then, looking at a handsome gold watch that he wore, continued:

"It is now after nine o'clock, sir, so we had better be on the march."

"I will give the order at once, sir," and Captain Canfield walked back to the camp more than ever impressed with his strange guide.

In fifteen minutes the command was mounted and Captain Canfield rode ahead with the Texan and the more he saw of him the more he admired him.

He sat his horse splendidly, and while conversing like one who had seen much of the world, never neglected his duty as guide for an instant.

Arriving at the river he had referred to, they crossed and held on for half a mile, to show that the trail still went northward, and then he branched off to the right and came back to the river-bank, following it up the stream.

It was after noon when a halt was called at the upper ford, and then crossing, a ride of several miles brought them to a narrow canyon which was the pass through the range.

There was good water and grass there, some timber, and a better place for an ambush could not be asked for.

Having divided his force, and leaving Lieutenant Lane in command, Captain Canfield himself went out with the rest of his force to the upper pass, the guide setting a brisk pace to get into position by night, he explained.

The second pass was even better for an ambush than the lower one, and Captain Canfield soon had his men in position, a camp being made half a mile back.

"I think this is the trail they will retreat by," said the guide confidently.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

THE pass for an ambush was an ideal one, for it was a deep canyon through a lofty range, with breaks here and there where men could lie in hiding their presence wholly unexpected.

"It would be well, sir," explained Valdós, "to allow me to take a dozen men to fall in behind the Mexicans, after they had passed, and when you attack to head off their retreat."

"It is just what I was going to ask you to do, Mr. Valdós."

"Thank you, sir; and you will not forget the orders to your men not to shoot the chief!"

"Ah, yes! but how are they to know him?"

"He always dresses as a Mexican of the highest rank, sir, and wears a mask."

"Yes, I remember now that I have heard so, and that his buttons are of solid gold, and that he wears a ruby serpent, with a head of emeralds and diamonds in his hat, which is worth a small fortune."

"It is, sir."

"Elmo is certainly a very strange man, for with the birth, bearing and education of a gentleman he is vindictive, vicious and cruel as death."

"And yet knowing him as you do you save his life?"

"Yes, I wish to cancel the debt I owe him."

"And that canceled?"

"Then, Captain Canfield, he must take the consequences of his own acts should he again become an outlaw," was the stern response of the Texan.

As it was not thought by the guide that the Mexicans would come through the pass until the following day, the men were allowed a good night's rest in camp, the Texan and one of the scouts standing watch.

It was thought that the outlaws would not start upon their retreat until they were sure that the soldiers had returned to the fort with their captured ponies.

The ponies had been corralled in a canyon near the lower pass, there to await the result of the ambush, so they were no trouble to those who were to lie in ambush at the two passes.

The morning dawned without any disturbance having occurred during the night, and the guide came in to breakfast, after which the soldiers were to be placed for the attack.

Captain Canfield and a dozen men took up their positions in the place of ambush, and a dozen more soldiers, under the guide, were stationed among the rocks to cut off the retreat.

There were several men left in the camp,

who could be called upon if needed, and the scouts went forward on foot with the Texan to report the approach of the outlaws.

They were to return and report to Captain Canfield when the time came for them to do so.

Going forward through the pass with his two scouts, Adrian Valdós took up position several miles ahead, where a view of the trail could be seen for miles, winding around the mountain.

Hardly had they taken position when the keen eye of the Texan detected afar off the coming outlaws.

"There they come," he said quietly, and turning his glass upon them he continued:

"Yes, they are coming, and at a brisk pace, anxious to push on as far as possible to-day, and be able to cross the Rio Grande before dawn to night."

"Ah! as I told Captain Canfield, they have his deserted horses with them, and I can only make out half a dozen Indians in their midst, so that there will not be over two-score of them to fight, and the opening volley will reduce the number largely; but ask him to be careful to again warn the men to fire no shot that may kill or wound the chief."

The two scouts at once started back on the trail at a trot, the Texan calling after them:

"Say to Captain Canfield to expect them in about an hour."

Then having taken another long look at the coming outlaws, and the trail beyond, to see that there was no protecting force of Indians following them, he started back at a brisk walk to his own command.

Turning off among the rocks he came, after a walk of several hundred yards, to a group of soldiers quietly chatting together, smoking or sleeping.

But at his coming they quickly sprang to their feet and saluted him politely.

"They are coming, men, and will be along in half an hour."

"There are, besides the thirty outlaws, half a dozen or more Indians, and they have, I see, your own horses along, so you will get them back again."

"Be ready to come when you hear my signal, for I shall watch them pass, but remember, the chief will be dressed in a handsome Mexican suit and wear a mask, while he always rides a jet-black, or a snow-white stallion, so fire no shot near to wound or kill him."

"No, sir, I want to see him taken alive and strung up," said the sergeant, and the men were of his way of thinking, for they knew not the secret of why they must not wound or kill the outlaw leader.

The Texan then went to his place of hiding and it was all of half an hour before the sergeant heard his signal to come with his men, and he at once started with them at a double-quick.

But just as they reached the Texan a crashing volley of carbines was heard in the pass that told them Captain Canfield had sprung the trap.

CHAPTER XI.

ELMO THE OUTLAW.

THE Texan, after leaving the soldiers, had been but a short while in position, which was but a few rods distant from the trail, when he beheld two horsemen approaching.

They were Mexicans and rode along with the cautious looks of scouts.

Soon after came a horseman leading a score of others, who followed a respectful distance behind him.

Though all were dressed in the Mexican garb, the one in advance wore a very elegant costume, elaborately trimmed with gold braid, while his sombrero was jet-black and handsomely embroidered.

In the front of the crown glittered the jeweled serpent Captain Canfield had spoken of, and over his face, concealing it perfectly, was a mask of woven wire.

His saddle, bridle and equipments were very handsome and richly adorned, and he sat his horse with the perfection of grace and equestrian skill.

His form was tall, his shoulders massive and he looked like one born to lead, even though he led men to deeds of crime.

The men who immediately followed him were all well mounted, equipped and armed, and they also wore black sombreros and black horses, which had given the name among the Texans of the "Black Hats."

Behind these came a drove of fine horses, about a hundred in number, and the animals which Captain Canfield and his men had been forced to desert in the canyon.

Following these, a number of which carried pack-saddles, were a dozen more of the "Black Hats," driving the animals, and keeping them well up behind the advance force, while in their rear rode a Comanche chief and ten braves.

The Indians had just gotten out of sight when the Texan gave the signal, and the sergeant and his men quickly came and took their places in the stands already selected for them.

Then it was that they heard Captain Canfield's men open fire upon the advance from his ambush.

When the captain gave the order, the two Mexican scouts were almost upon them, with those following within easy range.

"Remember, men, fire on each side of the chief, who you see is masked, and be careful in your other shots also not to kill or wound him—now, all ready—fire!"

The two scouts had been ordered to drop the Mexican scouts, and the soldiers had all aimed at the force with the chief, and the shots rung out almost as one rifle.

Both of the Mexican scouts dropped from their saddles, and of the force immediately with the chief half a dozen more fell, and also several horses.

Hardly had the rattle of the rifles died away when the chief called out in Spanish:

"We are ambushed, men!"

"Back to the Indian village, for your lives!"

The force wheeled quickly, but the soldiers were picking out their men now and several fell, while the retreat upon the horses and those in the rear threw them into confusion which was increased by the fire of the Texan and his force opening in their rear.

The retreat had begun, when suddenly several of the Indians fell under the fire in their rear, and as the Mexicans crowded upon them they too were shot down by another well-aimed volley.

"Pick off your men now at will," ordered the Texan coolly, and a shot from the repeating rifle with which he was armed brought down the Comanche chief.

Beaten in their front and in their rear, huddled together in terror and confusion and seeing soldiers now advancing upon them, while escape upon either side was impossible, the Mexicans yelled loudly for quarter.

But their cries were silenced by the thunder tones of their chief who shouted out:

"Cowardly dogs! do you cry for mercy from bullets, to die later at the end of a rope?"

"Follow me and cut your way back to safety!"

A cheer answered these brave words, and the Mexicans, to the number of a dozen, rallied around their chief, the remainder shrinking from the charge and holding up their hands for mercy.

As the chief and those following him dashed away in the ride for life, the Indians also joined them, and they swept back upon the Texan and his men, who had barred their retreat.

As they rushed on they were met by a volley that brought down horses and men and sent the rest back in flight from the terrible fire, for a shot from one of the soldiers had brought the outlaw chief's horse to the ground, and his rider fell heavily and lay motionless.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RELEASE.

THE scene in the canyon was one that was most thrilling, even terrible, for shots rattled viciously, the soldiers cheered, the outlaws cursed savagely, and the war-cry of the Indians rung above all, with the answering cries of the scouts and the neighing and snorting of frightened horses, all made tenfold more by the echoes that rung back and forth from among the cliffs.

In the midst of this scene the strange guide had run to the side of the fallen chief of the outlaws.

He found him half-dazed by his fall, but, conscious of his danger, he was struggling to rise, and, seeing a form approaching, he raised his revolver and fired.

But his hand was unsteady, his eye untrue from his fall, and he missed his aim.

Before he could pull trigger a second time the guide grasped the weapon and cried:

"Hold! do you not know me?"

"Ha! what does this mean, that you are with my foes?" and the chief struggled to his feet, while he continued, savagely:

"You are a traitor to me, and I will kill you, Adrian Valdos!"

"I am here to befriend you, for your life is in my hands.

"See! your men are crying for quarter, and not one will escape.

"Come with me—quick! or I will not answer for the result."

The chief went silently along, supported by the arm of the guide, for his steps were still unsteady.

The guide led him quickly among the rocks, toward where he and the soldiers had been in ambush, and if seen by the soldiers no notice was taken of it.

"Now you are safe, for there is a hiding-place among those rocks where you can remain until the command moves on.

"When it does come out, for you can see from yonder rocky point when they take the trail, you will find a horse, saddled and bridled left for you, and food and a canteen of water as well, for I will leave them.

"Your weapons will also be there, and you must disguise yourself as you have done before in visiting me, and make your way to my ranch, where I will soon join you, for you cannot cross the river until it is safe for you to do so.

"Now I must be off, or they may come here."

"One moment," cried the chief, eagerly.

"Yes."

"You are the traitor who led these men here?"

"I am true to myself, and my conduct to you now proves that I am no traitor to you.

"There is your hiding-place, and if you value your life go to my ranch, and await my coming."

With this Adrian Valdos turned away, unheeding the call of the chief for him still to remain.

Twice did the masked outlaw raise the revolver he still held and take deliberate aim at the retreating form of the guide.

But each time he was prompted not to pull trigger, and the form of the guide disappeared among the rocks, and at once, realizing his danger, the masked outlaw ran quickly to the cliff and climbed the rocks to the hiding-place pointed out to him.

When he reached the scene of the combat the guide saw that the soldiers had been too busy gathering up the prisoners and looking after the wounded, to notice his departure with the outlaw chief.

The two forces had joined, catching the outlaws in between them, and not a man had escaped other than the outlaw leader.

The Comanches had suffered a loss of half their party, and several of those escaping death were wounded, but stood defiant and calm awaiting the fate that might be theirs.

Over half the outlaw band had been slain, and of those who had surrendered half a dozen were wounded more or less severely.

But their horses, and booty on the pack-animals belonging to the soldiers, were all in the possession of the victors, who were delighted over their triumph.

Still the soldiers had not escaped unscathed, as four were dead and fully a dozen had received slight wounds, among the latter being Captain Canfield who got a bullet through his arm but made light of it.

With the dead and the dying, and over a score of dead horses on the field, the canyon presented indeed a very battle-like appearance, and the men that had escaped with their lives considered themselves most fortunate.

"Ah, Mr. Valdos, I was looking for you to thank you for a victory that is complete, for we owe it to you that our success was so great," and Captain Canfield offered his hand to the guide, who responded in his quiet way:

"Your success is only marred, Captain

Canfield, by the escape of the chief; but, I did but my duty by him, and your victory is a glorious one, while I am now ready to guide you to his stronghold and complete the good work."

"And I am ready to start when you will; but I was told that the chief had fallen by some stray shot, and I was fearful you might misunderstand it after my promise to you."

"No, no, it was a soldier who shot his horse, and I do not believe intentionally.

"The chief fell heavily, but I led him away and gave him his release, so you can make what report you please, sir, upon the matter, even stating your terms with me."

"No, I shall report the chief's escape, that is all.

"Now about leaving here?"

"I think it would be well, sir, to bury the dead outlaws and red-skins here, sir, carry your slain soldiers on to the other side of the river, where we camp to-night, and there give them burial, and from there the force can divide, those going to the fort, and those to attack the stronghold."

"I will at once give the order, sir," and Captain Canfield did so.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TELLING BLOW.

HAVING issued his orders to bury at once the slain outlaws and red skins, Captain Canfield, calling to the guide to accompany him, went over to where Lieutenants Lane and Cole were aiding the surgeon in looking after the wounded.

Captain Canfield said as he approached:

"After you have looked to the most serious cases, Sprague, I'll get you to examine my arm, for it bleeds considerably."

"At once, captain," answered the surgeon, when the guide remarked:

"Permit me to aid you professionally, Doctor Sprague, for I am a physician, and I will look after Captain Canfield and any others you may assign me to, for I have my case of instruments on my saddle."

"I shall be delighted to have your aid, Doctor Valdos, and am glad to know you are a *confrere*," replied Surgeon Sprague.

"Do not call me doctor, please, for I have buried the title forever, and am plain mister, now," and the guide hastened to his saddle and soon returned with a small case of surgical instruments, some lint and bandages and a morocco envelope of medicines.

As he was about to take off the captain's coat Lieutenant Cole came up and said:

"Valdos, again I wish to say I am sorry for my treatment of you."

The guide bowed, smiled and extending his hand said:

"Pray assist me here, for I will need aid."

The lieutenant had evidently expected the guide to gush over his second apology to him, and was a trifle piqued at the manner he received it, in silence, yet by offering his hand.

But he at once set to work to aid him, and all who saw the guide begin work felt sure that he understood well what he was about, while Doctor Sprague said in a low tone to Lieutenant Lane:

"That man is a skilled surgeon, I see.

"I wish I knew more of him, for I like him."

The bullet had cut through the captain's arm, but the wound was skillfully dressed and bound up by the guide, who then went to the aid of the other wounded, Lieutenant Cole still aiding him.

The scouts had been sent up the canyon to see that no force of Indians were following, and in a couple of hours' time the dead outlaws and red-skins had been buried, the prisoners thoroughly secured, the wounded all cared for and the horses all caught, so that the command was ready for the march.

The dead soldiers were strapped on the backs of horses, the most seriously wounded men were mounted with a well man to aid them, and the command took up the march for the river as soon as the guide returned with the scouts who were acting as guards. The guide had gone out on his spotted pony, but returned afoot, yet made no excuse for doing so.

It was near sunset when they came to the stream and crossed over, going into camp upon the other side, and then Captain Can-

field called his officers about him and held a council, the guide and the surgeon also being present.

"I wish to ask you, Mr. Valdoses, how far it is from here to the river?" asked the captain.

"We can ride to the nearest ford, sir, in five hours."

"And how long a ride upon the other side to the outlaws' stronghold?"

"Two hours, sir."

"What do you propose then?"

"That you dispatch the force that is to return to the fort with the wounded and prisoners in the morning, sir, and you camp here until noon with your men who go to the stronghold."

"Then we can ride to the river and get a couple of hours' rest, cross after dark, capture the stronghold and get over on the Texas side again before daybreak, without our presence being known there to the Mexicans, save the outlaws."

"That is the plan to follow, then; but what force would you take into Mexico?"

"The smaller the better, sir—say twenty picked men—but I forgot to suggest, sir, that it would be well to release your Comanche prisoners, when you leave camp tomorrow, for on foot they cannot get back to their village to do you any harm, and the stories they tell of the wiping out of the outlaw band will do a great deal of good in making them dread your power, and show them that you dared invade their own country and got out of it with victory on your side."

"A good idea, and we will set them free when we are ready to leave camp, letting them think we remain behind to guard the force that leaves early."

"Lieutenant Cole, you will take command of the force that goes to the fort, for you, Lane, I wish to accompany me, and you will pick out a sergeant, corporal and sixteen men, with two of the scouts, to go with you."

"What report shall I make to the colonel sir?" asked Lieutenant Cole.

"None."

"Simply say that I will make my report upon my return."

"May I ask, sir, how it was that the chief of the outlaws escaped, after his horse was shot and he, I believe, wounded?"

Captain Canfield's face flushed, but ere he could reply the guide said in his calm way:

"I aided him to escape, Lieutenant Cole, for, as pay for my services, I was given by Captain Canfield, the life and freedom of the outlaw chief."

"My motive for releasing him I shall not explain, as I consider it none of your business," and the guide walked quickly away without waiting for Lieutenant Cole's response.

CHAPTER XIV.

WIPED OUT.

THAT Lieutenant Cole had been the one to disobey his orders about the outlaw chief, and had fired upon him, missing his mark but killing the horse, Captain Canfield felt assured when he asked the question about the leader of the bandits.

The prompt answer of the guide had relieved Captain Canfield from making any explanation, and all could see that Lieutenant Cole was considerably cut by the retort of Adrian Valdoses.

As the guide had walked away so quickly the lieutenant could not reply to him, but said to Captain Canfield:

"The guide did want pay after all for his services, and got it too."

"If you do not like my conduct of this expedition, Mr. Cole, prefer charges against me upon your return to the fort, but let me have no more of your slurs and ill-temper now," sharply said Captain Canfield, while Lieutenant Lane remarked with fervor:

"Yes, Cole you are ungenerous, for I think the lives of all of us, the victory we have won and the capture of hundreds of horses and booty is cheap indeed at the price asked by that splendid fellow Valdoses, not to speak of the attack on the stronghold which he is to guide Captain Canfield to."

"If you have any complaint bring your charges and you will find that you have made a mistake," and Lieutenant Lane walk-

ed away to join Captain Canfield and the guide.

The latter made no comment regarding Lieutenant Cole, but when Lieutenant Lane went off to pick the men who were to accompany them to the outlaws' stronghold, leaving Captain Canfield alone with Adrian Valdoses, the latter said:

"You doubtless observed, Captain Canfield, that I rode away from the canyon camp on the spotted pony I had selected the night in the valley, and returned on foot?"

"Yes; Cole attracted my attention to the fact."

"I took the pony, sir, with a haversack of provisions, canteen of water and a *serape* to leave for the outlaw Chief, Elmo, as I promised him I would, and to have left him on foot, without anything to eat, would have been cruel even toward one who is himself merciless."

"I told him to make his way toward the Rio Grande, and I trust, sir, you will never hear again of Elmo the Butcher."

"It will be a victory to get rid of him so easily, Mr. Valdoses, and I shall frankly report the small return you asked for all your gallant services to me and my command, though naturally I should have been glad to have seen that man hanged," and no more was said upon the subject.

The next morning the force under Lieutenant Cole pulled out for the fort, all of a four days' ride at the pace they would have to travel, and the wounded were carried along on *travois* attached to the Indian ponies.

With the pack-animals and large herd of ponies, not to speak of their wounded, the soldiers had their hands full, but went off cheerily, with the good wishes of the comrades they left behind.

The latter force had been cut down for hard work, the men all picked for their nerve and endurance, and the horses selected as well.

Several extra animals were taken along in case of an accident, and only two pack-horses bearing provisions.

After an early dinner the captive Indians were given the provisions set aside for them and they were told to return to their people with all dispatch, taking their wounded comrades with them.

They seemed surprised, yet pleased, and at once took advantage of the permission, not understanding what it meant.

When they were out of sight the command was ordered to mount, and the guide rode to the front, Captain Canfield riding by his side.

The pace was set at a steady trot, and that the guide knew the country thoroughly all saw by the manner in which he saved every foot by cutting off the distance when it could be done.

A camp was made near the Rio Grande before sunset, and supper was prepared and men and horses had a rest and food, after which they mounted, forded the river and at a rapid canter followed the guide through the darkness, and in Mexico as in Texas he seemed to know his way thoroughly.

A sharp ride of a dozen miles up into the mountains brought the party to a heavily timbered canyon, and under the direction of the guide the troopers charged in upon a group of adobe huts surrounding them in an instant.

The surprise was complete, and though the dozen outlaws there showed fight, when several of their number fell, the others cried for quarter and were made prisoners, only one escaping in the darkness.

A large number of horses captured from Texans, and of booty as well taken from American houses, was quickly secured, and within an hour after the arrival of the troopers they were upon their return to the river, driving their recaptured animals before them.

Crossing the Rio Grande without meeting a soul they pushed rapidly on and went into camp only when miles were left between them and the river.

After a rest of a couple of hours the command again started on the trail, but at a slower pace than before, and after a few miles Adrian Valdoses said:

"That is your trail to the right, Captain Canfield, and mine goes to the left, for I leave you now."

"What? you will not go on with me to the fort?"

"No, sir, I have a duty that calls me to my ranch."

"Some day I hope we may meet again, and if you have to make a raid into the Comanche country, I will be glad to serve as your guide."

Entreaties for Adrian Valdoses to go on were of no avail, and Captain Canfield was compelled reluctantly to bid him good-by, while the men drew up and saluted as he rode by them on his lone trail.

They watched him until he rode of sight, saw him turn and wave his hat, and then they pressed on their way to the fort, feeling that to him they owed their lives and the victory they had won.

CHAPTER XV.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

SEVERAL months after the escape of Captain Canfield's command, and the capture of the outlaws under Elmo the Butcher, a small troop of cavalry was riding along a trail leading from New Mexico into Texas.

A couple of scouts rode a quarter of a mile in advance, and then followed a handsome man of middle age, wearing a fatigue uniform, the shoulder-straps indicating his rank as colonel.

By his side rode a young girl, dressed in a blue habit adorned with cavalry buttons, and wearing a hat encircled by a gold military cord above which were a pair of crossed sabers.

A heavy black plume fell from the hat upon her shoulder, and gave her a very picturesque look, which her beauty of face and form added to.

Behind them came a captain and by his side was a lady, evidently his wife, while the colonel's servant and a lady's maid followed, with a lieutenant and a score of cavalymen under his command.

Then came a dozen pack-animals with their drivers, while bringing up the rear were several more soldiers and a couple of scouts.

The lieutenant in charge of the troopers the reader has already met, for it is Cameron Cole who had been sent from Fort D—in Texas to meet, at a half-way point, Colonel Marcus Monastery who was ordered from New Mexico to make a tour of inspection through the lower Rio Grande country.

His daughter, Marcelite, having been invited to visit friends at Fort D—she had taken the opportunity of her father's going to have an escort, while Captain Silvester's wife was glad to go along also, the captain being attached to Colonel Monastery as his *aide-de-camp*.

At the first sight of Marcelite Monastery Lieutenant Cole had fallen in love with her and felt proud of the distinction of serving as her escort, though he had not at first relished the duty he was ordered upon to go through a most dangerous country to guard the colonel to the fort, for he had not known then that the ladies were in the party.

When he had returned to the fort, after the capture of the outlaws, he had very quickly thought better of making any charges against his captain, on account of his terms with the mysterious guide Adrian Valdoses, and nothing more had been thought of the matter, so it was dropped, Captain Canfield being highly praised for his success, though he was always frank to admit that he did not deserve the honor of the victory.

The captain, however, had made a full report of the affair, and in it had recommended Adrian Valdoses as in every way worthy of some reward from the Government for his most valuable services.

The two scouts ahead of the escort of Colonel Monastery and his party, came to a halt in a pretty valley that led up into a range of mountains, and where grass and water were plentiful.

"This is the best camping-place, sir, for the night, though the sun is yet an hour high," said one of the scouts, Wild Bill, who had accompanied the colonel from the fort in New Mexico, and was to go clear through to Fort D—with him.

"All right, Wild Bill, we will camp here, if Lieutenant Cole deems best, though it is early yet to halt."

Thus appealed to Lieutenant Cole replied:

"This is the best camping-place, sir, as Wild Bill says, and I camped here on my way on to meet you, sir."

"And we will have ample time to reach the fort day after to-morrow, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir, we can make it early in the afternoon."

"Then here we camp," answered the colonel, and the halt was ordered and a busy scene followed.

There were two small tents pitched for the two ladies and the three officers, the rest of the party throwing up wicky-ups to suit themselves, and a tempting supper was soon being prepared.

Lieutenant Cole had at once placed his sentinels, some distance from the camps, for they were in a most dangerous country, and the colonel was more anxious than he cared to show, for the safety of his daughter and Mrs. Silvester, with the small force of soldiers they had to defend them in case of an attack by a large band of Indians.

After supper, when night had fallen upon the valley, Marcelite Monastery got out her guitar and began to sing several Mexican ballads.

Her mother was a Mexican, Colonel Monastery having fallen in love with her when he was stationed at Fort D—years before, she being the sister of an officer of the army of Mexico, who was the colonel's—then a lieutenant—warmest friend.

Marcelite possessed all of the beauty for which her mother had been noted, added to which was the spirit and brilliancy of an American girl, and she at once upon leaving school and joining her father upon the frontier became the acknowledged belle of borderland.

Possessing a beautiful, sympathetic voice, Marcelite lulled the camp to silence to listen to her, and had just finished singing a plaintive ballad, when suddenly all started as a stranger appeared in their midst as they sat about the camp fire.

He had come from the darkness into the circle of the firelight like an apparition just as the last notes of the song died away.

Mrs. Silvester uttered a slight cry of alarm, Lieutenant Cole sprang to his feet and every eye was fixed upon the tall form of the unknown intruder into the camp, as he stood before them.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INTRUDER.

"WELL, sir, who are you, and how dare you intrude into the privacy of this camp?"

The speaker was Lieutenant Cameron Cole, and he spoke sternly as he suddenly faced the intruder.

The latter stood upright, calm and with commanding mien before the circle about the camp fire, every eye upon him.

To the question of Lieutenant Cole he replied in a low tone, strangely full of melody for a man's voice:

"Your memory is short-lived, Lieutenant Cole, that you fail to recognize me, for we have met before and under circumstances one cannot readily forget."

"Ah! you are the Texan with the Mexican name—Adrian Valdos."

"Yes, I am the Texan, Adrian Valdos, sir, and I beg to offer an apology for my intrusion into the privacy of your camp by stating that once more I come to warn you of danger, and to offer my services as guide."

"We have as our chief scout and guide Wild Bill, a man whom you must have heard of, so we really do not need your services, sir, though thanking you."

"I have heard often of Wild Bill," was the Texan's unmoved rejoinder, "and acknowledge his just fame as a scout; but even he cannot tell what is on the trail ahead of him, and hence I am here to warn you, and glad indeed am I to be able to do so now that I see that there are ladies in your party."

"As commander of the escort, sir, I am willing to trust to Wild Bill to guide us," replied Lieutenant Cole.

But behind him came the words:

"I am not, lieutenant, when this gentleman states there are dangers ahead on the trail which Wild Bill cannot know of or discover until too late perhaps."

The speaker was Wild Bill himself, and turning upon him Lieutenant Cole asked:

"Do you admit that you are at fault in the trail Wild Bill?"

"Oh, no, lieutenant, the trail is all right; but what danger is there in it ahead is the question."

"I have just come in from a scout but discovered nothing, and yet I saw this gentleman enter our camp unseen by any one until he got close to this fire, so I followed him, and if he is the guide of whom I have heard, as Adrian Valdos, who saved Captain Canfield and his command, I have full faith in him."

"Well said, Wild Bill, for I saw Canfield's report of that expedition and his mysterious guide."

"Are you Mr. Adrian Valdos, sir?" and Colonel Monastery approached the stranger.

"I am, sir."

"You appear to like the Mexican attire, rather than our simple garb, but that is nothing against you, and I am glad to meet you."

The colonel offered his hand, which Adrian Valdos took, raising his sombrero courteously as he did so.

Then Lieutenant Cole said:

"I am sorry, Colonel Monastery, that Mr. Valdos and I have never seemed to agree, though I confess the valuable services he rendered us, for I was one of Captain Canfield's officers you know on that expedition after the outlaws, but I think now we can trust wholly to the guidance of Wild Bill."

"I am no fool, Lieutenant Cole, and I wish to know what danger lies before me," was the scout's blunt response, and Marcelite smiled as she saw how it might be taken that the lieutenant was a fool in declining advice.

But the innuendo was not noticed apparently by the others, and Colonel Monastery remarked:

"I will be glad to hear what you have to report, Mr. Valdos, when you explain how you got into our camp unseen?"

As the colonel had taken the matter in hand Lieutenant Cole was compelled to remain silent, but he anxiously watched for the reply of the guide.

"I came down the mountain, sir, and passed in between your sentinels, not wishing to attract the attention of several Indian scouts who have been watching you, by having a sentinel challenge me."

"Do you mean that Indian scouts are watching this camp, sir?" asked Wild Bill, quickly.

"There were three who were watching the camp, but they returned to the valley just before I came between your line of guards."

"Then they came from ahead on the trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you inform me, Mr. Valdos, just what the danger is that we have to meet?" asked the colonel, with an anxious glance at his daughter and Mrs. Silvester.

"Let me explain, sir, that I have a ranch to the southwest of here some forty miles, and while hunting to-day on the range beyond, my glass revealed a large band of Indians in the pass through this range."

"I saw by their position and actions that they were lying in ambush for some one, and at once decided to warn whoever it was of their danger if I could reach them in time."

"I accordingly crossed the range and the plain between it and this one ahead, left my horse a few miles from here in the mountains, and came on foot to lie in wait in the trail."

"But when I reached the valley I saw three Indian scouts on foot watching this clump of timber, and then I discovered that whoever it was that they had gone into ambush for in the pass had camped here."

"I watched their movements until after nightfall, when, seeing them depart, I came here to warn you, sir, and also to offer my services as guide to lead you by a trail I know over the range, and thus avoid the ambush prepared for you by the Comanches, who are all of two hundred in number."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NIGHT RIDE.

THE terse, calmly told story of Adrian Valdos was listened to by all with the deepest attention, the two ladies especially impressed by his splendid form and very handsome, sad face and modest bearing.

Colonel Monastery was about to reply, when Lieutenant Cole said:

"Warned of our danger, colonel, cannot Wild Bill be our guide around to avoid it, as we have not force enough to fight the Comanches?"

"Pardon me, lieutenant, but I know only this trail we are on, never having been but once before in this country, so I could not guide you by night around the pass, for it must be done to-night," Wild Bill responded.

"What objection have you to Mr. Valdos being our guide, Lieutenant Cole, after he has warned us of our danger?" the colonel asked, somewhat sternly, for he could not but notice that the young officer wished to get rid of the guide.

"My objection, colonel, is not to be under obligation to outsiders, when we can do for ourselves."

"Will you undertake to guide the command around that pass to-night?"

"I am not a guide or scout, sir; but perhaps one of our other scouts can do so."

"I can vouch for them, that they cannot," Wild Bill responded.

"Pardon me, colonel, I do not care to force my services upon Lieutenant Cole, who commands this escort, but having saved his life upon a former occasion, I supposed that he would be willing to have faith in me, though it is a matter of utter indifference to me if he has not; but for your sake, and those with you, I advise that you allow me to guide you safely, if Wild Bill and his scouts cannot do so."

"You shall do so, sir."

"You are right, colonel, for I know that this is a country that few scouts know, and two hundred Comanches on our trail are to be avoided, even though we had Lieutenant Cole's entire troop of cavalry."

"As for myself, I pass, and the scouts along will draw out of a game, too, which they know nothing about."

The colonel smiled at Wild Bill's sportsmanlike way of expressing himself, and turning to the volunteer guide, asked:

"Do you consider it best to go on to-night, sir?"

"By all means, sir, for to-morrow will be too late."

"And you will undertake to be our guide to safety?"

"I will gladly do so, sir, as you have ladies along, though of course I regret to place Lieutenant Cole under obligation to me."

"I shall not feel that I am, sir, for I believe we could avoid the danger; yet, for the sake of the ladies, it is best to take no risk."

"But you will accompany us, Lieutenant Cole, and not attempt to extricate yourself from the danger?" said Marcelite, and the officer's face flushed, while Mrs. Silvester smiled, for there seemed to be a tinge of sarcasm in the question.

"I am under orders, Miss Monastery, to escort you in safety to the fort," was the lieutenant's reply.

"Then I am glad my father has accepted the services of this gentleman as a volunteer guide, and," turning now to Adrian Valdos and extending her little hand, "I desire to thank you, sir, for your kindness in coming to warn us of our danger."

The Texan bowed low, in taking the extended hand, and replied:

"It is a satisfaction as well as a pleasure, Miss Monastery, to do my duty."

After a few words apart with Wild Bill, Colonel Monastery turned again to the volunteer guide and said:

"Now, Mr. Valdos, I will ask you to assume your duties as guide, and Wild Bill will aid you when needed."

"When do you wish to start?"

"The sooner the better, sir, for it is a rough climb and a long ride across the plain to the range beyond, while the darkness of the night will delay us by slow travel."

"Lieutenant Cole, please break camp and get ready to start at once," ordered the colonel, and the young officer saluted and walked off to obey, but it was evident that he was very sorry to have Adrian Valdos again cross his path, yet he was too shrewd not to wish to profit by his services, though he hoped to find the danger not as great as the guide had reported.

The tents were quickly taken down and packed away with the camp utensils, and

the command was ready to start in half an hour.

An extra horse had been given to the guide, who rode ahead with Wild Bill, the other scouts having been left to guard the rear.

Turning back on the trail they had come for a short distance the guide then branched off sharply to the left.

He had no trail to guide him now and did not seem to need any.

Wild Bill rode by his side and watching him closely soon became convinced that he knew just what he was about, for he went on through the darkness unerringly.

Up the valley he went to the foot-hills, then over them into the mountain range and up the steep sides, along the edge of dangerous canyons and through dense timber, under the shadow of overhanging cliffs and then on up to the summit of the mountains, where a halt was made for a short rest before the descent was begun on the other side to the plain below.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GUIDE'S PROOF.

THE descent of the other side of the mountain was more dangerous than had been the ascent.

The journey had to be made in Indian file, and even in the darkness it could be seen that there were perils passed which it was better for some of those with dizzy heads not to have seen by daylight.

Not once did the strange guide falter, and even Wild Bill, with his iron nerve and cool head, wondered that the man dared risk certain places for the timid ones to follow.

"Leave all to your horses—mine will lead the way and yours will follow," he had said at starting on the descent.

Like a serpent the long line wound its way downward toward the valley, and after a ride of a couple of hours reached the plain.

A rest was wished for by all, but the guide said:

"It is not very far from here to where the Indians are in ambush, and some stragglers may come this way, so we must push on."

So push on they did across the barren plain, for it was far different from the fertile valley beyond the range which they had crossed.

There was not a bush or tree in sight, only a rock here and there, with sand and pebbles.

The ride across was about six miles and a short halt was made before the climb up the mountain before them.

The guide had told the colonel and Wild Bill all the danger they had to fear, so that the horses were not unsaddled, and the men were not allowed to go to sleep.

After fifteen minutes' rest they again mounted and began the climb of the mountain and were glad to find it less high, dangerous and steep than the one behind them.

The top was reached as the Eastern skies began to take on that peculiar light that betokens the approach of day, and here the guide called a halt and said:

"Colonel Monastery, if you will allow Lieutenant Cole to continue on with the party, for the trail now is plain, I would like to have you, Captain Silvester and Wild Bill remain behind for a while that I may show you the sight that caused me to try and prevent you going into an ambush."

"I will be glad to see it, Mr. Valdost," answered the colonel, and gave the necessary orders.

The command then moved on, one of the scouts leading, for they had come into a well-defined trail, and the guide had told him that a mile away they would find a good camping-place.

Those whom he had asked to remain dismounted and awaited the coming of dawn.

Gradually the day brightened, and, hiding among the rocks on the mountain-top, Adrian Valdost said:

"Now direct your glasses at the foot of yonder high cliff, where you will see a small clump of timber."

They did so, and Colonel Monastery said quickly:

"There is an Indian camp there, and their horses are grazing upon the little meadow near the cliff."

"Yes, sir, and they are guarding the pass through which you were coming."

"In fact, sir, they are now waiting for you to ride into an ambush, for their three scouts reported last night that you had gone into camp in the valley, instead of pressing on to the camping-place at the mouth of the pass."

"They will soon discover that you do not come, and scouts will be sent out to reconnoiter and it will be shown that you have left and your trail taken."

"Then these will follow you over the mountain with part of their force, while the others will push on to where you crossed the plain and then pursue."

"That is just what they will do, and, pard, I for one owe you my life," said Wild Bill.

"If we had gone into that pass not one of us would have escaped, that is certain," and Wild Bill grasped the hand of the Texan.

"Yes, Mr. Valdost, you certainly have saved us from an awful fate," and the colonel spoke with deep emotion as he thought of his beautiful daughter as being killed, or falling alive into the hands of the savages.

Captain Silvester had the same thoughts, and he too was profuse in his gratitude to the guide, who remarked:

"Now there is but one thing to do, as I see it."

"My horse is near the camp where I sent the command, and, if you, Wild Bill, will go and get your breakfast and fetch him to me, I will remain here and watch those red-skins."

"It will be a couple of hours yet, Colonel Monastery, before they really will be able to start in pursuit, and then they have to cross the plain and this range, so you have all of five hours' start, after resting a couple of hours."

"But their horses are fresh, while yours are jaded, as well as your people, and I would suggest, sir, that you leave Wild Bill here with me, and a couple of scouts and eight soldiers to make a stand at this very place."

"We can beat them back, for they will suppose your whole force is here, and then Wild Bill and his men can hasten on after you, I remaining alone to keep up a fire with my repeating-rifle."

"When they again attack I will have gone, and the delay will have put even your tired horses beyond all chance of being overtaken."

"Your plan is a good one, Mr. Valdost, all except leaving you alone here."

"Do not fear for me, Colonel Monastery, for even if the Indians saw me they would do me no harm."

"Indeed? Then you are their friend?" said the colonel, with surprise.

"No, sir, I am their foe, but they are *my* friends," was the enigmatical response.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN OFFER ACCEPTED.

As the mysterious guide made no explanation of his remark, that he was the foe of the Indians, while they were his friends, Colonel Monastery did not press him for one, but remarked:

"Mr. Valdost, Wild Bill will remain here on the watch, while you go with Captain Silvester and myself to camp and get your own horse."

"When the men come back who are to remain here, you can lead them, and we can send Wild Bill his breakfast."

"If you so wish, sir, I will," said the guide, and he added:

"As there is good water and grass in the camp below, and none here, it would be well to take the scout's horse along, and when the men return let them come on foot, and pick up their animals on their retreat, thus giving them a longer rest."

"A good idea that," said Wild Bill, and he took up his position as sentinel, glass in hand, while the others rode on down the range to the camp.

It was just a mile away in a hole in the range, where there was a lake and grass and wood in plenty.

All except the cooks had thrown themselves down to rest, after the horses were unsaddled and staked out, and when Colonel Monastery rode up with Captain Silvester and the guide, breakfast was just ready.

"You breakfast with us, Mr. Valdost," said the colonel.

The guide bowed his thanks and removed his sombrero as Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester approached.

They then saw by daylight his darkly-bronzed face, handsome, fearless, and full of intelligence, while they could not but note the look of sadness that seemed to haunt the large black eyes, with long eyelids that a woman would envy.

His black hair was worn long and fell in waving masses upon his broad shoulders, his hands and feet were small and shapely, and his dress was a rich one—that of a Mexican cavalier.

Upon the small finger of his left hand he wore a ring, with a shield of diamonds, in the center of which was a large ruby.

His shirt was of soft gray silk, beneath the collar being a black scarf, in which was a diamond pin representing a human eye.

His manners were courtly, his language that of a refined and educated man, and his whole bearing was so antagonistic to one who led the wild life that he must, that no one could understand the mystery of his doing so.

"It was reported, Mr. Valdost, that your terms with Captain Canfield for the services you rendered him were simply the life and pardon of the chief of the outlaws," said Captain Silvester, as they were eating breakfast.

"Yes, sir, that is all I asked."

"You certainly must have had some strong motive for wishing to spare such a man, for I have heard such terrible stories of Elmo the Mexican."

It was Mrs. Silvester who spoke now, and in response the guide said:

"I had a strong notion, Mrs. Silvester, to return debts of gratitude I owed to him, though I am sorry to say he is almost as bad as he has been painted."

"And where is he now, Mr. Valdost?" asked Marcelite.

"He went to Mexico after his escape, Miss Marcelite, and I trust will give the United States Government no further trouble."

"Now, Mr. Valdost, a word about yourself?" said the colonel.

The guide bowed in silence.

"You are a Texas ranchero, I believe?"

"I am, sir."

"I live on my ranch a day's ride from here."

"The Indians do not harm you?"

"No, sir, they are my friends, as I told you, sir."

"And you their foe?"

"Yes, sir, for I owe nothing to them, and they are the enemies of all Texans; but circumstances once placed me in a position that protects me from them."

"You are a young man, Mr. Valdost, scarcely thirty I should say, a man of education and refinement, so why not give up this wild life of danger and solitude?"

"I came here, sir, not from choice, but from circumstances beyond my control, and the wild life I lead chimes in with my humor."

"Yet you would not refuse to come out of it, if it were possible?"

"How, do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, Mr. Valdost, that you have eminently shown yourself fitted for leadership."

"Your conduct of Canfield's expedition he has told me of, and I know what your services last night were."

"Knowing this, and your nerve under trying circumstances, added to your appearance and bearing, I think I am safe in saying that I can procure for you an appointment as lieutenant in the United States Army, for the President would be glad to reward your services by such a well-deserved appointment."

The face of the guide flushed and he seemed to feel what the colonel had said, but replied:

"I confess, sir, that such an appointment I would most highly appreciate, but I would dislike to receive it as a reward, as payment, in fact, for what services my duty caused me to render."

"You must not look at it in that light, Mr. Valdost, for the same services that you have rendered would gain for an officer of

the army promotion to a higher rank, and that is looked upon as just payment from the Government for value received," said Marcelite Monastery.

"That is just the way to put it, Marcelite," Mrs. Silvester remarked, while Captain Silvester said:

"Yes, Miss Marcelite, your argument is unanswerable."

"I trust that Mr. Valdós is convinced by it," rejoined the colonel with a smile.

"If I can say more I will gladly do so," said Marcelite.

"You have said enough to convince me, Miss Monastery, that I should accept your father's most kind offer," was the guide's answer.

CHAPTER XX.

TO CHECK THE COMANCHES.

ADRIAN VALDOS saw by the expression of the faces of those about him, that his decision to accept an army appointment had given them real pleasure.

He did not wish to appear to desire a reward for his services, yet the manner in which it came he could not refuse, or disregard.

"I will write to the Secretary of War immediately upon reaching Fort D—, Mr. Valdós, and will also send through Captain Canfield's request, which I feel sure will be indorsed by his officers and men, and the general commanding the Department, in fact all who have heard of your good work for the army."

"Lieutenant Cole is an officer in Captain Canfield's company, and hence owes his life to Mr. Valdós, so of course he will indorse the recommendation, though he has so far given consent only by silence," said Marcelite.

The lieutenant flushed at this direct attack, for thus far he had said nothing in favor or against the appointment of the guide.

Now appealed to, and by Marcelite Monastery, with whom he was desperately in love, he could not but reply, so said:

"Whatever Captain Canfield recommends for the guide I will be pleased to indorse."

"But you owe even more than Captain Canfield to Mr. Valdós, for he has just saved your life with ours, making you a second time a debtor to him," said Marcelite wickedly, for she had observed that the lieutenant did not, for some reason, like the guide.

"I acknowledge all that I owe the guide, Miss Monastery."

"Would it not be better to refer to Mr. Valdós by his name, rather than as guide, Cole?" asked the colonel with some asperity.

"I beg pardon, Mr. Valdós."

"I really do not care for an indorsement from Lieutenant Cole, Colonel Monastery, so if his name is upon the recommendation I shall decline the appointment if made," and all saw that the secret ill feeling of the young officer against the Texan was going a little beyond bounds, and Marcelite was quick to come to the rescue with:

"My father's recommendation, and Captain Canfield's, will be all that is needed I am sure, Mr. Valdós, and you will get your commission beyond a doubt; but don't forget to tell my father where a letter will reach you?"

"A letter to Fort D— will reach me, for I send to the sutler there for the supplies for my ranch, Colonel Monastery," and the Texan then continued:

"You had better all get what rest you can now for a couple of hours, and I will return to relieve Wild Bill, and take what soldiers you may wish to send back with me, sir."

"Lieutenant Cole, select ten of the best mounted men to return with Mr. Valdós to the top of the range, and they are to leave their horses here, but all ready for a hasty departure."

"After a rest of two hours more we will continue the march ourselves."

The lieutenant saluted and walked away to obey his orders, much chagrined that his manner toward the guide had made Marcelite his champion.

"I have made a fool of myself: but I cannot down my belief that that man is false, is playing a double game, that he is a wicked man, and if he gets an army commission the next thing he will attempt will be to marry Marcelite Monastery."

"No, no, that shall not be, for I love her

with all my soul, and it will be a bold man that robs me of her."

Having obeyed his orders, Lieutenant Cole returned to the headquarters camp to find that the Texan had departed, the ladies had gone to take a short sleep in the tent pitched for them, and the colonel and Captain Silvester were spreading their blankets to follow their example.

The soldiers were already asleep, save the guards, and so the lieutenant sought his own blankets for a nap.

When he left the camp the Texan wended his way along the little valley until he came to a canyon into which he turned.

It was narrow, grass-carpeted and a spring flowed through it in a tiny stream.

A short distance from the entrance two or three small trees had been cut down and ranged as a barrier across it, and beyond was seen a splendid black horse cropping the grass.

At sight of his master he uttered a low neigh and came trotting up to the barrier.

"Well, Comrade, you have had a good time of it, for you have literally been in clover, here, and now we must go."

So saying the Texan went to some bushes and took out his saddle, bridle and traps, and putting them on the horse mounted and rode away from the canyon.

He took the trail leading near the camp, but all were asleep and no one saw him, and he continued on up to the top of the range, whither the soldiers had already gone on foot.

Reaching the summit he found the soldiers had already arrived and were asleep, while Wild Bill was calmly eating the breakfast they had brought him.

"Well, pard, what news?" asked the scout as the Texan approached.

"After a sleep of two hours Colonel Monastery will continue the march, and that start will keep them from being overtaken by the Comanches, if we check them here, as we must."

"But what have you seen?"

"It is just as you said, pard."

"There was a great excitement half an hour ago, and some of them mounted and rode through the pass, while the rest went up along the range—see them?" and Wild Bill pointed to where the Indians were then halted upon the trail of the troopers.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SURPRISE.

THE Comanches were beyond doubt coming at once upon the trail of the party, that had so cleverly eluded them.

Their scouts had discovered, soon after dawn, that they had left their camp, and so had hastened back with the news to the large force lying in ambush.

There the Indians had divided, a third of their number mounting in hot haste to follow them over the mountains, while the rest had hastened on to head them off at the point where they must come down the range into the plain.

They knew the perilous path over the range, but did not believe that it was known to the white scouts, or that the party would attempt to make the ride by night.

They therefore supposed that they would be able to head them off at the bottom of the range, and with half a hundred warriors behind them, they would be caught in a trap almost as secure as the one at the pass would have been, only they would not be able to surprise them.

They supposed that a scout had gone on at night and discovered them in ambush, and thus thwarted their surprise of the soldiers; but they felt sure of giving them a crushing defeat at the foot of the range, and thus wipe out the stain of their missing Captain Canfield's command half a year before, for they little dreamed that, as then, the same mysterious guide had rescued Colonel Monastery's party from a massacre.

While Wild Bill ate his breakfast, the Texan was watching the Indians through his glass, and said:

"They have discovered that they were too late, that you have crossed the plains, and already they are starting upon the trail."

"It will take them all of two hours to reach here?"

"Oh, yes, even though their ponies are

fresh, they will not be here under two hours and a half."

"And the command will then have been an hour on the march?"

"Yes."

"Where did you wish to make a stand, sir?"

"Just where we are, Wild Bill, for, as you see, they have to wind along a zigzag trail in coming to this spot, which brings them within range for several hundred yards."

"That is so."

"We can drive them back by a hot fire, and then, while they are holding a pow-wow as to what to do, you and your soldiers can run down the trail to where your horses are, and the longer rest they have had will soon enable you to overtake the command."

"And you, pard?"

"Oh! I'll stay here, firing a few shots to keep their scouts back, and then mount and ride away."

"If you are not seen."

"Trust me for that."

"Why not go on with me?"

"No, I must return to my ranch, thank you."

"I wish you were an army officer, or at least a scout, Mr. Valdós."

The Texan smiled and then told Wild Bill what Colonel Monastery had said about getting him a commission.

"Good! he'll do it, and I'll chip in my little recommend also, for I can vouch for it, that, with the exception perhaps of Doctor Frank Powell the Surgeon Scout there is not an officer of the army that can follow a trail or knows the lay of a country as you do."

"Yes, sir, I'll ask the colonel to send in my indorsement too, for Wild Bill is not wholly unknown at the War Department."

"I well know that, Wild Bill, for your reputation is known far and wide, and I do not doubt but that your indorsement will help me."

"But see, those fellows are coming more rapidly than I thought, and they will run on foot up the range, so as to relieve their ponies."

"They will reach here by the time the colonel will have been half an hour on the trail."

The two men then sat down and watched the coming Comanches as they pressed on hotly along the trail.

They saw them stretched out in a long line, yet enough were in the advance to prove dangerous in an attack.

At the base of the range they made a short halt for their comrades to come up, and then on foot they ascended the steep trail, leading their ponies.

When they had gotten half-way up the range Wild Bill awoke the corporal and his men, and they were placed in the most advantageous position.

Refreshed by their breakfast and sleep, and with the red-skins near at hand, over a hundred in number, they were ready for the fray, and stood cool and determined, awaiting the command to fire.

Soon an Indian chief came in sight, leading his pony, and behind him rapidly appeared his braves, until half a hundred came into view.

By the time that the chief was in range the whole party, except those who were following the trail over the other range were in view, and Wild Bill said:

"There are just a hundred and forty of them."

"Yes, and we are fifteen; but we will make them believe that we are the whole force."

"See, there come the others now, out from the base of the other range," and the Texan pointed to where the other force of red-skins were coming into view.

After a few moments more, and when the chief was not sixty yards distant, the Texan said:

"Now, men, pick out your targets and fire at the word."

"Let no shot miss."

"Ready! aim! fire!"

There was a crashing sound as the carbines of the troopers and repeating rifles of Wild Bill and the Texan flashed together, and a wild, startled yell from the amazed red-skins, who were driven hastily back to cover.

CHAPTER XXII.

WILD BILL'S DISCOVERY.

THE soldiers had obeyed their instructions and picked their targets, for hardly a shot failed to find a human form, while the repeating rifles of the guide and Wild Bill dropped half a dozen more bullets among the flying red-skins.

Back to cover as fast as they could run went the Indians, some springing upon their ponies and riding them back at full speed, and others deserting their horses to find shelter for themselves.

The repeating rifles continued popping until they were out of range, the soldiers, by Wild Bill's order, getting ready to retreat down the hill to their horses.

"Have my horse ready for me, for I will soon be along," said the scout, and with a salute of farewell to Adrian Valdos the soldiers departed at a brisk pace down the hill.

When they had gone Wild Bill said:

"Now, pard, you expect me to desert you?"

"Oh no, it is not that, for I will be all right; but I expect you to go after your men with all haste."

"They can find their way on after the command."

"No, for they will not leave without you, and as they are not trailers they might lose their way without you."

"Will you go too?"

"Do you not know that these Indians might show themselves in a few minutes, and if no shot was fired at them, they would come on at a rush and perhaps overtake the command?"

"That is true; but is there no way that they can flank this place?"

"Only by going back to the plain and crossing miles above."

"Then you are safe, you are perfectly sure if I leave you?"

"Perfectly, for they would not harm me, if they did not know that I was now firing upon them."

"Then I will go on after the command, though it is not my way to desert a comrade in trouble."

"Some day I hope we will meet again, and if you ever need a friend, remember Wild Bill, pard," and the scout wrung the hand of the guide and was off at a run.

He heard a shot now and then from the guide, doubtless fired at a red-skin who exposed himself, and when he reached the camp he found the soldiers with their horses saddled and bridled and ready to leave.

"Come, pards, we must push on after the command," he said.

"And that brave gentleman would stay behind, sir?" asked the corporal.

"Yes, he wished to keep up the idea that we were still there—but hark! that is fierce firing, and the Indians are using their rifles."

"Push on, corporal, and follow the trail, and I will come on soon as I can; but I must go back to that bold fellow's aid, for I have an idea that he needs me."

With this Wild Bill spurred on up the mountain for some distance, then dismounting he threw his bridle-rein over a limb and ran on at full speed, for he did not wish to tire his horse out with the climb.

He was a fleet runner and had wonderful endurance, but the trail was a steep one and he was panting like a hound when he arrived.

What he discovered was the Texan standing at bay and firing his revolvers, one in each hand, as rapidly as he could pull trigger.

Without a word to the Texan, Wild Bill uttered his terrible war-cry and called out:

"Ho, men, now fire!"

As he did so he began to open with his repeating rifle, and just in the nick of time, for the Indians were coming on at a run, firing their rifles and arrows as they did so, for a number of them had fire-arms.

The arrival of the scout at once checked their advance, for they felt that if the command had retreated, as they believed, they were coming back again.

"You are a dead shot, pard, as well as a good guide and scout," said Wild Bill, as he glanced down the trail.

"They made a rush on me, evidently sus-

pecting that the command had gone, and after emptying my rifle I began with my revolvers."

"And did good service with both, I see."

"As you did, for your coming was just in time, as I was about to mount my horse and run for it, though I felt that the Indians would recognize me and no longer regard me as a friend."

"But let us empty our rifles together with one hand, at yonder point, and fire a revolver with the other, and the shots will sound as though a score of men were firing."

"A good idea, and then retreat?"

"It will be best, and you can hasten on after the command."

"Yes, and you?"

"I will go to the camp and then must go my way."

"Which way is that?"

"I will join the Indians."

"Join those red-skins?" cried Wild Bill in surprise.

"Yes, for I can come up as though not in the command, and I can tell them a story that will prevent further pursuit."

"Mr. Valdos, you are a very remarkable man," said Wild Bill impressively.

The Texan smiled, and the weapons having been reloaded the two fired their rifles and a revolver each together, aiming at the point where the Indians had disappeared.

Then they hastily departed, the Texan mounting his horse while Wild Bill ran down the hill.

Reaching the scout's horse the two parted when they had reached the camp, and while Wild Bill went on after the command, when he disappeared from sight the Texan deliberately took the trail back up the mountain again.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRIEND OR FOE.

SLOWLY up the mountain rode the Texan, after leaving Wild Bill, until he reached the top, the scene of his combat with the Indians.

He went along most cautiously, like one who expected to be fired upon at any moment, and yet he saw not a sign of a red-skin.

Their last lesson had made them think that the soldiers were still there, so they became very cautious and were going to resort to strategy to accomplish what force could not do.

As he reached the summit the Texan dismounted, and fastening his horse to a stunted pine, he took a position from whence he could glance over upon the trail.

The trail ran there down the mountain in a zig-zag course, and around under the edge of a cliff behind which the Indians had taken shelter.

It was higher as they went down, and in no place was there a chance to scale it all the way to the plain below, so that the red-skins would have to retreat that way, go further up the range and seek another crossing miles away.

This the Texan knew so that he was not at all disturbed by fear that the Indians could make this flank movement over the range and overtake Colonel Monastery and his party.

"No, they will have to come this way; but when their comrades come up with them they may make another charge upon the trail."

"As long as they are quiet I will not show myself, for it will give the colonel that much more time to press on and get beyond pursuit."

"I will wait here until I discover a suspicious movement upon their part and then show myself."

So the Texan calmly sat down upon a rock where, between a clump of bushes he could view the trail.

An hour he had been there and then he saw a head peep around a rock not a hundred yards away.

"I must show myself," and so saying he ran back to his horse, mounted and placing his hand to his mouth gave three long, distinct war-cries.

Almost instantly came a dozen echoing similar cries from behind the ridge and a moment after Adrian Valdos rode into view, his hands raised above his head, the palms turned toward the red-skins.

A dozen rifles were raised, and it was an instant of great peril to the Texan; but they were as quickly lowered and he rode to the edge of the ridge and called out in the Comanche tongue:

"Let my red brothers come here."

Without a moment of hesitation half a hundred forms sprung into view, and from their lips broke the same long, loud war-cry which the Texan had uttered a short while ago.

The war-cry was taken up by the Indians beyond the cliff, and the mountains rung with a thousand echoes.

But the Texan did not change color, but simply sat his horse with unmoved face awaiting the approach of the Indians, for they were hastening toward him, while, though they did not fire upon him, they yet looked very dangerous.

As those on foot reached the top of the ridge, there came from behind the cliff their companions on horseback, all pressing toward the ridge.

"My red brothers are welcome."

"Where is the great chief Gold Bonnet?" said the Texan in a loud voice as the Indians drew near.

"The great chief Gold Bonnet is wounded badly by the bullets of the pale-faces, the people of the Lone Medicine Chief, the foes of the Comanches."

"Where are the pale-face braves, and why is the Lone Chief here?" came the answer of a tall young chief who had taken command after the fall of the head chief.

"It is the Mustang Rider who speaks?" questioned the Texan, looking closely at the young chief, as though he now recognized him.

"I am the Chief Mustang Rider," proudly answered the young Comanche, his braves standing silently about him.

"Let the Lone Medicine Chief tell him then that he saw the pale-face soldiers pass, heard them fire upon his brothers, and when they had gone on the trail, he came here to see if he could not be good medicine for the braves of the Gold Bonnet who had been hit by the bullets of their foes."

"Let the Gold Bonnet and the wounded braves be taken to the camp below, and the Lone Medicine Chief will care for them."

"The Lone Medicine Chief talks well, his heart is good; but let him first tell with a straight tongue of the foes of the Comanches," said the young chief, and a grunt of approbation ran through the crowd of warriors.

"What would the great young Chief Mustang Rider know?" calmly asked the Texan.

"He saw the pale-face braves?"

"Oh, yes, he was near them."

"How many braves were there?"

The Texan silently raised his hands, with his fingers spread open, four times to indicate forty.

"There was a great chief?"

"Yes."

"How many squaws?"

"Three," meaning the two ladies and Marcelite's maid.

"How long have they been gone?"

"Three hours."

"All of them?"

"No, the great white scout, Wild Bill, and a comrade remained behind."

"There were more."

"The Mustang Rider is wrong."

"The two had rifles that speak many times, and they did so with their little guns," and the Texan showed how the many shots had been made, adding:

"The Lone Medicine Chief has eyes—he saw them."

"The Comanche braves were fooled, for the braves had marched away, went long ago also."

"The Mustang Rider will pursue with his braves and capture them, for the scalp of the great white Evil Spirit, Wild Bill, is worth much to the Comanches, and it was the Evil Spirit who kept the pale-faces from falling into our trap at the range yonder."

"The Evil Spirit is a great scout, and the Mustang Rider would only follow to his death, for the many speaking guns of the pale-faces would cut down his braves like trees before the storm."

"They are far away, and fleet riders are coming out from the fort to meet them, so

let not the Mustang Rider lead his braves to death.

"The Lone Medicine-man has seen—he knows," and the Texan spoke impressively.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LONE MEDICINE-MAN.

THE impressive manner of the Texan had its weight with the Comanche braves, and the young chief who was inclined to push on in pursuit, saw that he would be alone in the wish.

They had already lost a score of braves killed, and as many more wounded more or less seriously, among them being their head chief Gold Bonnet.

To push on after the pale-faces, several hours in advance, and with the prospect, as the Texan had hinted, that other soldiers were coming from the fort to meet them, might result far more seriously to them.

So the Mustang Rider, though most anxious to make a name for himself, saw what the temper of his braves was and concluded to acquiesce.

He therefore said:

"The Lone Medicine Chief has spoken well, and it was the wish of the great chief from beyond the river, that the Comanches should listen to his words.

"Where is the great chief, the Pale-face Killer, now?"

"The Pale-face Killer is beyond the river, for the white braves destroyed his camp and captured his riders," was the Texan's answer.

"Let the Lone Medicine Chief come now to see the Gold Bonnet," and the Mustang Rider led the way down the trail to where the wounded chief was lying.

The Texan dismounted and followed him, and they soon came to where the chief lay upon a blanket.

A bullet had pierced his side, and the warriors who had gathered about him felt that he was mortally wounded.

Glancing at him with a professional eye the Texan ordered him taken up, with the other wounded, and borne over the ridge, where there was plenty of water, wood and grass.

He walked by the side of the wounded chief, and when they reached the camp, a few hours before deserted by the soldiers, he had him placed in a secluded spot, and getting his case of instruments and medicines from his saddle pocket, he set to work to probe the wound.

The chief did not even flinch under the probe, for it was his nature to defy suffering, and the Indians about looked on with admiration for their chief and a dread of the pale-face medicine-man, as they called the Texan, for he had worked wonders before in their village among the sick and wounded, causing them to lose faith in their own medicine-men.

The bullet was at last found, and removed with some difficulty, the wound most carefully dressed, a soothing dose given to the chief and the Texan turned to look after the other wounded braves.

Several were beyond his skill, and he frankly said so, the groans coming from their comrades, not from those who knew they must die.

Those more slightly wounded were looked after then until all had been attended to.

The Mustang Rider had sent out his scouts along the trail of the soldiers, but they were told not to go too far, and simply to guard against a return of their foes, should they be reinforced and come back to attack them.

To the Mustang Rider the Texan said that it would be well to camp where they were for several days, until the mortally wounded had died, and the chief Gold Bonnet was able to be removed, for he was rallying rapidly, and after a week could be carried by easy marches to his village.

The influence of the Texan seemed to be felt by each brave, and the young chief, in the chance of Gold Bonnet for recovery, dared not follow the bent of his own humor, so he had the dead buried, instead of being sent to their village as he had intended by a small force, while he pressed on with a band of picked warriors in pursuit of the soldiers.

Having decided to remain for some days, the camp was made more comfortable for the

wounded, hunters were sent out for game and a line of scouts were placed around the encampment where danger might be expected.

It was evident that the Texan fretted under his detention there, but he could not but submit to it with a good grace, and so he devoted himself to the wounded.

Several days thus passed away, and one day the Gold Bonnet appeared so much better that the Texan allowed him to talk, his first question being about the Pale-face Killer.

"He is across the river, his braves killed, or prisoners, and he dare not come again into Texas," was the answer.

"The Pale-face Killer is a great chief; his heart is good, and his red brother the Gold Bonnet loves him.

"Let the Lone Medicine Chief tell him to come back across the Rio Grande, and he will give him a hundred of his best young men to aid him make war upon the pale-faces."

"I will tell the Pale-face Killer."

"The Lone Medicine-man is the brother of the Gold Bonnet, too.

"If he would come to my village I would make him the great medicine-man of my people, for he has saved my life, and my braves.

"Will he come?"

"The Lone Medicine Chief must dwell alone—he cannot go to the village of the Gold Bonnet; but he thanks him.

"To-morrow the Gold Bonnet will be able to be moved, and he will go back to his people, the Lone Medicine Chief to his lone tepee."

And so it was that the next afternoon the Indians broke camp, carrying their wounded on *travois*, and seated upon his horse as they filed away the Texan watched them until they had disappeared in the distance, when he muttered:

"A strange people, whose religion it is to kill—who can blame them?"

CHAPTER XXV.

WILD BILL'S RECONNOISSANCE.

WHEN Wild Bill parted with the Texan he rode rapidly on for a mile or more, then came suddenly to a halt.

"I will do it!"

He uttered the words in a determined way, then rode back on the trail he had been following until he came to a canyon leading off to the left.

Entering this he saw that it went only for half a mile back into the hills, and at its end was a steep trail leading over a range.

"That trail is made by deer, and leads to this pool and grass.

"Where deer go, my horse can, so here is the place for you to wait for me, old fellow.

So saying, he staked his horse out with a long line, and shouldering his rifle, set out on foot back along the trail to the range.

He soon passed the spot where the camp had been, and observing a lofty cliff near, he circled around it and mounted to the top, concealing himself among some dwarf pines growing there, for he saw that, from his position, he overlooked the place where they had beaten back the Indians, and not a quarter of a mile from him was the Texan, seated upon a rock at the edge of the ridge, while his horse stood near.

"That looks strange, his going back to meet those red-skins.

"Yet he certainly fired upon them, and he saved our whole outfit from death.

"I'll stay and see what it means.

"Ah! he is rising now, and he is going to mount his horse.

"I guess he has just waited there to give the red-skins another fight if they advanced, and allow the command that much more time to get away—

"No, he is riding over the ridge—the red skins must have retreated.

"As I live, no!"

"He is raising his hands as a signal for peace," and Wild Bill continued to watch the ridge until he saw the Indians come up and surround the Texan.

"Well, that beats all," he muttered, as he beheld the Texan dismount and leave his horse while he went over the ridge.

When he returned he was accompanied by

a party of red-skins bearing their wounded comrades, and Wild Bill watched them on their way to the camp.

"Well, he has prevented them from pursuing the command, that is certain, and he is in no danger apparently, so I had better be looking after my most particular friend J. B. Hickok, or it may be the last of him," muttered Wild Bill with grim humor, and he at once retreated along the ridge, made his way swiftly, yet with extreme caution, back to the canyon, and mounting his horse, rode on at a rapid gallop after the soldiers.

The animal was well rested, had had a good feed, and went along at a brisk gallop, leaving his hiding place hardly ten minutes before the Indian scouts sent out passed the canyon and went along the trail a mile or more to stand guard, so Wild Bill had had a closer call than he had thought.

In spite of having seen that the Indians had not at once pursued the command, Wild Bill felt a dread that they might yet do so, and, as their ponies were fresh, he knew that by hard riding they could overtake the worn-out animals of the colonel's party.

Had not the ladies been along the scout would have been in no hurry, for the soldiers could have stood at bay and given their pursuers a very severe lesson; but it would not do to risk a fight when Marcelite Monastery and Mrs. Silvester were along, as they might fall under the fire.

It was yet a long ride to the fort, and Wild Bill had counted the Indian force sufficiently close to know that they could bring a couple of hundred well mounted and armed warriors into an attack.

So on he rode at a swinging gallop, and yet it was late in the afternoon before he came in sight of the command, for Colonel Monastery had pushed steadily on, intending to make an early camp for the night.

Seeing the scout coming the soldiers broke forth in a cheer, for the corporal having reported that he had remained behind for some reason, and that he had heard hot firing on the range, all began to feel anxious regarding his safety.

But he came along at a swinging gallop, his face unmoved by excitement, and raising his hat courteously as he passed the ladies, he drew rein only when he reached the colonel, who was riding ahead with two of the scouts.

"Colonel Monastery, I have a report to make to you, sir, and then I would like to drop behind a few miles with a couple of scouts, while you go into camp for a good rest, as I see that your cattle need it, sir," he said, politely.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SOME SECRET POWER.

"I AM glad to see you back again with us, Wild Bill," said Colonel Monastery, as he heard the scout's words, and he at once drew his horse back behind the two scouts with whom he had been riding, while he added:

"Halt at the first good camping-place you come to, men."

The scouts rode on at a more rapid pace, and the colonel said:

"Now, Wild Bill, you have something to report to me, I am sure?"

"I wish to report, sir, that we gave the red-skins a good lesson, and drove them back to shelter, and then I sent the corporal on with his men."

"Yes, they joined us about an hour and a half ago, and we were anxious about you as the corporal reported that you sent him on while you returned, and he heard hot firing back on the range they had just left."

"Yes, sir, I went back because I heard firing and felt sure that the Texan intended to still remain and keep the Indians in check."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were right?"

"I was, sir, for he had opened upon them hotly, emptied his rifle and was down to his revolvers when I arrived and the Indians coming on rapidly."

"He is a plucky man, Wild Bill."

"He has as much nerve as any man I ever met, sir."

"But to your story?"

"I chipped in with my repeating rifle and

it proved to be a surprise party, for the redskins had evidently thought that the command had gone, leaving perhaps two or three men as a rear guard; but my repeating rifle changed their ideas, for they concluded the soldiers had come back and so hunted cover."

"You put it modestly, Wild Bill," said the colonel with a smile.

"I'm always modest, sir, when I tell the truth," was the smiling response of the scout, who then continued:

"The Texan seemed glad to see me, though surprised, and we loaded our rifles and rattled them off with our revolvers, just to let them think there was a number there, and then we left the range."

"At the camp the Texan left me, sir, and I came on a short distance and then decided to return and reconnoiter."

"I left my horse in a canyon, returned to the high point of rocks you remember near the spot where the two trails met and came over the range."

"Yes, the trail we would have come by and the one the Texan led us by?"

"Yes, sir."

"I remember the high point."

"I hid up there and saw the Texan seated on the side of the range, his horse standing near."

"What was he there for?"

"To still check the Indians, I thought, sir, if they again attempted to come on after you and so gain for you more time."

"And all alone too?"

"Yes, sir."

"Noble fellow."

"While I watched, sir, I saw him rise and look over the range, then mount his horse and riding to the summit raise both of his hands."

"What! they were upon him?"

"They were coming, sir, and he did it in token of peace."

"And they fired upon him?" anxiously said the colonel.

"Indeed they did not, sir, fire upon him."

"What then?"

"They were as friendly with him as thieves, and he went over the range and returned with their wounded, taking them to your camp, sir."

"This is remarkable."

"He was evidently in no danger, sir, and was big medicine-man with them, that is certain, for he was looking after their wounded."

"Yes, he is a surgeon you know that he said."

"Yes, sir."

"And then?"

"I found that I had to get out or lose my scalp, so I left, sir, returned to my horse and rode hard to overtake you, sir."

"And I am glad that you did, Wild Bill; but what do you make out of the Texan's mysterious friendship with the Indians whom he had fought a while before?"

"And fought hard, sir, for that man throws away no shots."

"It is beyond my comprehension, his behavior."

"He certainly kept them from pursuing you, sir, I am glad to say, for they did not do so, but went quietly into camp and put out their scouts; but whether they will think better of it and come on it is hard to say, so I wish to drop back a few miles with a couple of men, take a point where I can see the trail for some distance, and if they come on send word to you, thus giving you good time to move on, sir."

"A good idea, Wild Bill; but what do you make out of the Texan being the foe and friend alike of the Comanches?"

"He said they would not harm him, sir, that he was safe with them unless they knew him to be against them, and so I take it that he has some secret hold upon them that we do not understand, and he does not care to make known to us."

"Yes, some secret power over them he certainly has," said the colonel, and after a few more words with Wild Bill, the latter rode back on the trail, accompanied by a soldier and a scout.

A few miles further on the scouts in advance came upon the very spot for a camp, and which was capable of being well defended as well, and here the halt was made for the night.

Colonel Monastery told Captain Silvester and the others at supper what Wild Bill reported about the Texan, and they wondered at his mysterious secret power with the Indians, that prevented them from putting him to death, while Lieutenant Cole said:

"You may not believe it, Colonel Monastery, but I am sure that that man, Adrian Valdos, is crooked, that he lives a double life, and some day you will find out that I am right."

"I shall wait for proof of it before I believe it," was Marcelite's quick response.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MARCELITE ASKS A FAVOR OF WILD BILL.

It was just after sunrise the next morning that Wild Bill was reported coming into camp with his two companions.

He was seen at some distance off, and came along at an easy gait that showed that he was not pursued.

As the scout was behind him upon the trail, Colonel Monastery had been in no hurry to make an early start, for he was anxious to give all the party and the horses as long a rest as he could, as they needed it.

Riding into camp, Wild Bill had at once sought the colonel and reported to him that the Indians had evidently given up the pursuit or been persuaded from it by the Texan, for from his position he could look back miles over the trail and could see nothing of them coming.

"There is no way that they can head us off and ambush us, Wild Bill?" asked the colonel.

"No, sir, not in this part of the country."

"Well, after breakfast we will start on, and we can reach Fort D—to-night, I believe."

"Yes, sir, by sunset, for the horses have been well rested and the trail is an easy one to travel."

So after breakfast the party pulled out, Wild Bill in the lead, and setting the pace, a pace he was determined should take them into Fort D—before sunset and get Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester out of danger.

He had been but a short time on the trail when he heard hoof-strokes behind him, and looking back saw Marcelite Monastery coming after him at a gallop and alone.

"I thought I would ride ahead with you a while, Wild Bill," she said, in her sweet way.

"I'm delighted to have you, Miss Marcelite; but it's no place for a lady, when a shot may greet you at any time."

"I'll take the chances, for I am not so afraid of bullets as some men I have seen, and you know I am a regular border girl, having lived in a frontier fort half of my life."

"Ah, yes; I know that you can outride half the men, throw a lasso and shoot dead-center with rifle and revolver, too; but then, if a man goes under it is a kind of a matter of course, we expect it; but I should hate to see harm befall you."

"Yes, and nobly have you done your duty on this march, that no harm should befall Mrs. Silvester or myself. Nay, I know that you do your duty at all times, but on the long trail we have come you have hardly slept at all, it seemed to me, and you have been more than ever cautious."

"But, Wild Bill, what do you think of that mysterious Texan guide we had?"

"That he saved the lives of every one in this outfit," was the blunt response.

"I grant that; but Lieutenant Cole does not like him."

"That does the Texan no harm, miss."

"And says that he leads a double life."

"None of us let the world see just what we are, Miss Marcelite."

"I believe you are right, but Lieutenant Cole thinks that his friendship for the Indians makes a traitor of him."

"God help such friendship as he has for the Indians, for I saw him bring down four or five myself, and if he was their friend he would be a renegade and a traitor to us; but he saved us, and fought them, so let Lieutenant Cole guess again, for he is a long way off the trail to accuse that man of treachery."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Wild Bill, for that is my opinion."

"But I have a favor to ask of you."

"I'll grant it without knowing what it is."

"I knew that; but it will cause you considerable trouble and hardship, carry you through much danger, and take you perhaps a week or more."

"You have my promise, miss, so never mind the hardships and danger."

"I believe you go back again soon after we reach Fort D—?"

"Yes, after several days to rest my horse, miss."

"You return alone?"

"All alone, unless I get a party to guide back again."

"You know that my father—all of us, in fact, are anxious to have Mr. Valdos appointed to a lieutenantancy in the army?"

"He deserves it, miss, if any man does."

"But, with Lieutenant Cole's insinuation against him, and the facts of his really being unharmed by the Indians, there will be a stumbling-block in the way."

"Has Lieutenant Cole any influence like that, miss?"

"He has influential friends, and as my father would not wish to recommend Mr. Valdos with a shadow hanging over him, I wish you to dispel that cloud."

"How can I, miss?"

"I thought that you might return north by way of his ranch, find out where it is, who is there with him, and all that you can. You might make some excuses, you know, such as to see if he got home safely."

"I'll do it, miss."

"And you'll write me just what discovery you have made, for I will be at Fort D—for some time?"

"I will do so, Miss Marcelite."

"That is the favor I had to ask of you, and it must be a secret between us."

"Now I will fall back to the rear, but I'll remember your kindness, Wild Bill," and Marcelite awaited the coming up of the command.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HALT ON THE TRAIL.

WITH the determination that there should not be another camp on the trail that night, to risk more for the fair ladies with the party, Wild Bill pressed on at a pace that caused Colonel Monastery to ride forward and join him.

"You're keeping a brisk and steady pace, Wild Bill," he said.

"Yes, colonel, for the horses will not have to travel to-morrow and there is no need of taking the chances for another camp to-night."

"Do you think the Comanches would dare follow us this near to the fort?"

"Well, sir, they might, if they knew there were other bands near to be a support to them, and I have noticed the signs of several bands about, fully as many in each as the one we met."

"Ah! that accounts for your speed, scout, and you are right, so do as you deem best about urging the horses, for, as you say, this is their last day of hard travel," and Colonel Monastery felt sure that Wild Bill was the right man in the right place.

But for the presence along of his daughter and Mrs. Silvester, the colonel would not have ridden so hard, but taken the chances of a brush with the Comanches; but he would not expose them to the slightest added danger that could be avoided.

He had thought of sending a courier on ahead to request a force sent out to meet them, but at the pace they were traveling a man could hardly reach the fort very long in advance of them, and so the best thing to do would be to continue on themselves.

"My daughter came forward for a ride with you, Wild Bill, but I knew that you would send her back if there was any danger in her being here."

"The country was open when she was here, sir, so I thought it would be safe for a short distance."

"Yes, I saw that, so was not anxious about her."

"At this rate we will reach the fort by three o'clock."

The scout did not answer, for he had come to a halt.

He was looking at a trail just before him.

After a moment he said:

"Colonel Monastery, that trail is not an hour old, and was made by fully two hundred braves."

"Yes, it is a large one."

"Now you must take no chances, sir, and right there is the best place to halt," and Wild Bill pointed to a rise in the almost level plain about them.

It was a rise of some thirty feet above the surrounding country, with the top, half an acre in size, covered with a thick growth of dwarf pines, while the approach to it was over rough ground.

"Do you mean we must camp there?"

"Yes, sir, and set to work to make the place as strong as possible, if you have to kill your horses for a breastwork, for I am sure that the Indians are between us and the fort, and another band is within call of them."

"If you go on you will simply get into an ambush, or have to run for it, which the horses are not equal to, or fight out in the open, which would be madness, so I urge that you camp there, sir, and though there is not an Indian in sight, prepare for a hard fight, while I, for you see my horse is not in the least used up, will make for the fort with all speed, and by hard riding going and coming I can get back to your aid soon after nightfall."

"Perhaps, seeing that I am going for help, and that your position is a strong one, the Indians may not dare remain to attack you, and so make off, for fear a large force may come out after them, but even if you see them depart do not leave your stronghold, for all will not go at first you may be certain."

"You are ever wise and cautious, Wild Bill, and I will do just as you suggest," said the colonel.

The command was now close upon them, and anxious to lose no time, Wild Bill saluted and darted away upon his splendid horse.

All were surprised at his going, all save the scouts with the party, for their experienced eyes had also detected Indian signs, and they were sure that they would see them before they reached the fort.

When the scouts saw Wild Bill dart away they knew that their worst fears were to be realized.

The colonel took no time to make explanations, but ordered the command to once make for the little hilltop, and they went at a gallop.

Then he held a short conversation with Captain Silvester and Lieutenant Cole and they at once set to work with a will, for the safest place was selected for the ladies, and fortified with trees hastily cut down and the pack-saddles.

The men were placed in positions of defense, the horses stretched around in a circle, to be sacrificed if need be, to make the position stronger by using them as a breastwork, if they found it necessary to kill them for that purpose.

In half an hour of time the little fort presented a very warlike appearance, though not yet had an Indian been seen.

Wild Bill had disappeared in the distance, still riding like the wind, and Marcelite, who was on watch, while the men worked, suddenly called out:

"There is a horseman coming along on our trail at full speed."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RED-SKIN MESSENGER.

THE words of Marcelite brought her father quickly to her side, and he beheld a horseman coming swiftly along their trail.

He was following it with no eye apparently ahead, or upon either flank, only upon the trail.

As he drew near the little hill he seemed to move a little more cautiously, and to be glancing ahead.

With his glass to his eye Colonel Monastery said:

"It is an Indian, and he is riding with considerable speed, and beyond doubt is following our trail for some purpose."

"Wild Bill was right, as he always is, and that fellow is evidently on the watch of our movements to report to comrades near."

"We can catch him, I believe."

With this the colonel called to the scouts who rapidly took in the situation and ran on foot to points of advantage, which would

bring the Indian within easy range, if he came on to where the trail turned off to come to the hill.

Unseen by the red-skin they got into position, and then lay in wait ready for him, while he was yet a mile away, for when first seen by Marcelite he had been all of four miles distant.

The colonel had told them to bring down his horse, not to hurt him, and three of the freshest animals of the lot were ready, with riders by their side, to dash out and run him down the moment he was dismounted.

Nearer and nearer came the red-skin horseman, until presently he halted, just where the troopers' trail branched off to come to the hill.

As he raised his eyes to glance at the hill, where not a soul was visible in the thick growth of pines, a puff of smoke burst forth from a knoll and the Indian's horse dropped dead.

The rider went down with him, but quick as a flash had thrown himself behind the body of his horse for shelter.

At the same moment the three scouts sprung to their feet and rushed toward him, while the ready horsemen dashed out from the timber at full speed.

Thus caught, and not knowing that his life was to be spared, the Indian sprung to his feet and raised his hands above his head, one of them holding up a large snow-white feather.

As the men advanced upon him he called out:

"Don't kill! Eagle Wing is friend."

The scouts and soldiers at once surrounded the Indian, who was a tall, finely formed young brave, his face showing no dread in spite of the ordeal through which he was passing.

"Well, Comanche, we want you," said one of the scouts in the Comanche tongue.

"Eagle Wing want see big white chief," was the reply in English.

"Yes, and the big white chief wants to see you, so come along," and the red-skin was led up to the hill and taken before Colonel Monastery, where he stood with his daughter, Mrs. Silvester, the captain and Lieutenant Cole.

"You did not hurt him, scout?"

"Oh no, sir; but he speaks English and says he wishes to see you."

"You big chief?" asked the Indian, calmly surveying the colonel.

"Yes, I am the chief, and you are a Comanche brave."

"Me Eagle Wing—not chief yet, but hope to be big chief some day."

"See this!" and the Indian held out for observation a ring.

"It is the diamond shield ring of Mr. Valdos," cried Mrs. Silvester, who had admired the ring greatly when she had seen it on the Texan's hand.

"Umph! white squaw right."

"The Lone Medicine-man tell Eagle Wing come to big chief, show him this ring, and tell him with straight tongue about Indian on his trail to kill."

"Then say little white squaw keep ring for him."

He looked from Mrs. Silvester to Marcelite and handed to the latter the ring.

"That Texan is a fool," muttered Lieutenant Cole, but the Indian caught the words and replied:

"No, have heap sense; he good man, great brave, mighty medicine chief."

"Don't want his people kill by Comanches, so tell Eagle Wing to come, catch big chief and tell him send two three good rider to fort for help, he fortify him people in strong place to wait till soldier come and drive red men off."

"Plenty Comanche brave there, there, here, here," and the Indian messenger pointed to the trail ahead, then to one side and another to show that Indians were upon every side.

Colonel Monastery's face grew serious, while Lieutenant Cole remarked:

"I do not believe a word of this story."

"Eagle Wing speak with straight tongue; he know, and Lone Medicine Chief know, so tell Eagle Wing to come—send ring to prove no crooked tongue talk."

"And I believe you, my good Eagle Wing, for Wild Bill reported that the Texan had had gone back and joined the Indians and he

has made some discovery of their intention to hem us in."

"I wish to talk more with you, Eagle Wing," and the colonel gave orders to Lieutenant Cole to look to the work of strengthening their position.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RED-SKINS' RUSE.

LIEUTENANT COLE bit his lips as he saluted and walked away, feeling that the colonel did not desire any more comments from him about the Texan.

"Now, Eagle Wing, tell me just what the Lone Medicine Chief, as you call him, wished you to tell me?"

The Indian stooped and taking up a stick drew a trail which represented the one the colonel had traveled, and marked the spot where they then were.

Then he continued the trail on to the fort, and afterward marked out the spot where the Indians they had eluded still were.

Three other marks were put, two of them quite near their position, the other further off, to show that there were other bands of Indians there.

"How many?" asked the colonel.

The red-skin said, as he pointed to the different marks:

"Most hundred *here*, more than hundred *there*, two times hundred *this place*, and back on trail you know plenty Comanche."

"This would indicate that, with those we have avoided, there are all of five hundred Indians around us, Silvester, any one of the band being within half a day's call, and those between us and the fort only a few miles away."

"Yes, sir, that is as I understand it," replied the captain, while Eagle Wing remarked:

"Yes, that him all right."

"And where is the Texan now, Eagle Wing?"

"With Eagle Wing's band; medicine chief to Big Chief Gold Bonnet and wounded braves, for all hurt bad."

"I see."

"And he got you to come on this message for him?"

"Yes; Eagle Wing love heap Lone Medicine Chief."

"He save Eagle Wing's life when bad sick; save his scalp two time."

"Eagle Wing no bad Injun to his people, no friend of pale-faces, but Lone Medicine Chief tell Eagle Wing save his people, the big white chief and squaws, and he come."

"If Eagle Wing's people see him come they think he crooked brave, love pale-face, but he do what his white brother tell him, and maybe be kill by his brother warriors."

"But if they see him come they see white braves shoot horse and catch Eagle Wing, so let Comanche brave run after little while, you shoot, but no hit, and get away; have white brave run after Eagle Wing, but no catch, and he tell Comanche he get away."

"A clever ruse, indeed, Eagle Wing, and it shall be as you say."

"I will have the rifles loaded without ball, and you can ride off on one of the troopers' horses, so that it will look as though you had made your escape, and I will have your hands bound behind you to make it more realistic."

The Indian smiled at the plan of the colonel, and seemed to be content, and then said:

"Better send riders to fort, as Lone Medicine Chief told big chief."

The colonel was about to state that Wild Bill had already gone, when Marcelite said quickly, in Spanish:

"Do not tell him, father, that Wild Bill has gone, for of course he will repeat it to his comrades, and it may cause them to hasten their attack, if they have not seen the scout go, for they may not have done so."

"A good suggestion, Marcelite; you are indeed a soldier's daughter," responded the colonel in Spanish, and turning to the Indian he said:

"No, I'll send no riders now, for my young men are brave and can fight hard, if your people attack us."

"Comanche will come."

"I do not doubt it; but as you have done your duty I will reward you in a way that will not look like doing so," and the colonel ordered one of the best horses to be brought

up, saddled and bridled, and fastened to it a rifle and a pair of revolvers, with a couple of fine *serapes*, a soldier's overcoat and some other things that might prove useful.

He also tied on a bag of provisions, a canteen of water, and put in the saddle-pocket some gold and silver money, but took good care that no cartridges for the fire-arms should be given the Indian, so that he could fire back at them when he joined his comrades.

Then the horse was staked out near, and having tied the hands of the Eagle Wing behind him, he ordered him to mount.

The red-skin was as active as a cat, and leaped into the saddle in spite of his hands being bound.

"Now let the Eagle Wing go," said the colonel, and the horse started off, dragging the rope, with the stake on the end after him.

The Indian gave a glance behind him, as though dreading that treachery might be shown and the rifle be loaded with ball, but when they began to fire at him, and he was not hit he seemed satisfied of the good faith of the pale-faces toward him.

When he had gotten several hundred yards away, out dashed a couple of scouts and three troopers in pursuit, though they did not urge their horses to their utmost.

But the ruse was a success, for hardly had Eagle Wing gotten half a mile from the hill, his horse urged to its full speed, when over a rise dashed a score of mounted warriors to his rescue.

At sight of them the five pursuers quickly came to a halt and dashed back to cover, for there was no longer any doubt that Indians were near in force.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HEMMED IN.

"SILVESTER, the Texan was right," said Colonel Monastery, as he saw the Indians dash out to the rescue of Eagle Wing, as they supposed.

"Yes, sir, we owe a great deal more to Mr. Valdos than we can ever repay; but I cannot understand his secret influence with the Indians, and how he could make a hostile deliberately plot to keep us out of the clutches of his companions," said Captain Silvester.

"It is remarkable; but yet he did so.

"The Indian himself said that he was our foe, but that he acted only to serve the Texan."

"I hope there will be no mistake about Wild Bill's going through."

"I have no fear for him, Silvester, for Wild Bill is a man who surely bears a charmed life, and then too his plaincraft, skill and nerve will carry him through without fail."

"Oh yes, I look for reinforcements from the fort to-night, Captain Silvester," remarked Marcelite.

"I only hope, that your hopes will be realized, Marcelite," said Mrs. Silvester sadly.

"See, the Indian has joined his comrades and is gesticulating wildly to them, doubtless telling of his escape," said Colonel Monastery, viewing them through his glass.

After having heard his story his comrades gave a wild yell of defiance and hate, shook their lances at their foes and rode back over the rise from which they had ridden into view.

"Now colonel, can I do anything more to strengthen the fort?" asked Captain Silvester.

"We will make a round of our fort and see, captain," and the two officers began the round.

The hill top, as I have said, was not much over half an acre in size, and the summit was thickly covered with a dense growth of dwarf pines.

In the center these had all been cut down and were brought to the outer edge and placed in position as a barrier, the branches being forced in also, and what dirt could be dug up had been thrown over all, thus forming a breastwork two feet in height.

The center of the hill was seamed with ravines, and here had been pitched the tent for the ladies in one, and the camp for the

men in another, so that they would be in little danger there from the bullets of the Indians.

The horses had been all ranged just back of the breastworks, awaiting their fate, for there was neither grass or water there for them, only the water in the canteens of the soldiers being the supply on hand.

Should it be deemed necessary, then the horses would be slain and dragged up against the outer side of the works, so as to form a much better defense in the weak places.

A hospital had been prepared in the ravine for the wounded, a corporal and a soldier, who had been hospital stewards, being detailed as acting surgeons.

Provisions were set out for the men, fires built for cooking, and three hours after their arrival the stronghold was ready to receive their foes if they came, though the work of strengthening the works still continued.

Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester were to have charge of the ammunition, and all were assigned to duties that would enable every man to use a rifle.

Captain Silvester had command of one side of the stronghold, Lieutenant Cole of the other, and Colonel Monastery took control over all.

The sun was just an hour high, when Colonel Monastery said:

"Now let them come, for we are ready for them."

Had they heard his words the effect could not have been more electrical, for there suddenly came a cry of alarm from a dozen voices, all around the stronghold, as they beheld appear in view, as though by magic, hundreds of red-skins.

They rose over the tops of ridges, out of ravines, and from rises averaging from half a mile to three miles distant.

There were full half a thousand of them, and the sight was appalling.

They appeared where they could, according to where the nature of the ground allowed them to be in hiding, and one and all of them were mounted.

"That is a most formidable force, Lieutenant Cole, and if Wild Bill has not been able to get through, we will have a desperate struggle to keep them at bay."

"Yes, sir, we will, and though that Texan appeared to serve us well, I lay it to him that he saved us then, for some motive sinister of his own, to entrap us afterward."

"Lieutenant Cole, I observe that you allow your prejudice to warp your good sense and justice, regarding Mr. Valdos, and unless you have proof of his being what you almost directly charge against him, you will oblige me by not again speaking of that gentleman to me."

The colonel spoke kindly, yet firmly, and Lieutenant Cole bowed in silence.

Gazing at the Indians through his glass, as they slowly advanced and hemmed in the stronghold, Colonel Monastery said:

"As I live, there is our Indian courier, for I recognize him by the cavalry overcoat which he has put on."

"The traitor! I would like to get a shot at him, sir," muttered Lieutenant Cole, raising his repeating rifle to his shoulder.

"On the contrary, Mr. Cole, he is the one I would spare, after his good service to us, for, if a traitor it was not to us, but to his own people."

The speaker was Marcelite, who had suddenly glided to the side of her father, who responded:

"Well said, my child, and I shall go the rounds ordering all of the men to spare that Indian, for he deserves it."

"Now, Lieutenant Cole, I will leave you, for you know my orders regarding the repelling of the attack, and I will make the rounds with my young *aide-de-camp* here," and he smilingly referred to his daughter, whose face though pale, showed not a shadow of anxiety as to the result of the conflict.

"Father," said Marcelite, as the two walked away from the lieutenant's post of duty:

"You have under your command here, Captain Silvester, Lieutenant Cole, a sergeant, corporals and twenty-four men, thirty soldiers in all."

"Yes, Marcelite."

"Then there are four scouts, now that Wild Bill has gone, five pack-horse drivers and camp rustlers, making thirty-nine fighting men, or forty including yourself, with

Mrs. Silvester, myself, my maid Ellen, with your negro servant, the last four of little use."

"Forty men can do wonders, my child, when brought to bay."

"And five hundred warriors to fight them."

"Our position is a grand one, and Wild Bill saw its advantages at once."

"We are splendidly fortified as well, there are, with my own weapons, Silvester's, Cole's and the four scouts, seven repeating rifles in the party, and thirty-five carbines, while the Indians are but poorly armed, and come within our range a long way off."

"The ground is rough for them to ride over, and we can beat them back until Wild Bill comes with help."

"We are hemmed in, Marcelite, but our chances are bright to win the victory."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COMANCHES' CHARGE.

MARCELITE, after hearing her father's statement of the chances, felt much relieved, and went on the rounds with him, showing by her face that she had no dread of the result.

The soldiers saluted her as well as the colonel, and time and again she overheard the words:

"We'll be the braver, comrades, for having her to defend."

Returning to Mrs. Silvester, whom she loved dearly, as they had been friends several years before, when the captain's wife was a bride, for she was half a dozen years older than Marcelite, she said:

"Now don't be blue, Eloise, for I have been the rounds with my father and heard a plain statement of facts."

"Our position is worth a couple of hundred men, our repeating-rifles another hundred, then the carbines of the men as many more, which puts it about as though forty men were fighting three times their force of Indians, you see, for a trooper is worth three red-skins any time."

Mrs. Silvester laughed at Marcelite's reasoning, and replied:

"You argue well for our side, Marcelite, but the Indians take a different view of it."

"Wait until they are convinced."

"Yes, but precious lives must end to convince them."

"Well, soldiers, like scouts, die with their boots on, and I have no fear of the result, Eloise."

"You are a dear, brave girl, Marcelite, worthy to be a true soldier's daughter and a soldier's wife."

"I am not as accustomed to this wild life as you are, but you may be sure that I will not disgrace the colonel's daughter or my captain by showing the white feather, so depend upon me, for your bravery cheers me."

"That's right, be a *man*!" laughed Marcelite, and then she added:

"Father gave orders for no one to shoot at the Indian courier whom Mr. Valdos sent to us, for he has already donned the cavalry overcoat he gave him so we can pick him out."

"Perhaps the cunning fellow put it on hoping that we would spare him."

"I had not thought of that, and he was pretty cute, wasn't he?"

"But, father told me to wear Mr. Valdos's ring, and you should have seen Lieutenant Cole's face when he saw it on my finger, for he hates the Texan with religious enthusiasm."

"He certainly does, and I believe he has some reason for it he will not make known to us; but Lieutenant Cole is surely in love with you, Marcelite."

"No, you don't think so."

"I am sure of it."

"Well, it is your fault, not mine," was the philosophical response and just then there came in the loud, commanding voice of Colonel Monastery:

"To your posts all!"

"Stand ready to fire only under orders!"

"That means the Indians are coming, and we must go into hiding; but I am going to see that red-skin charge, and you come too, if you will, Eloise, for I had Peter build me a lookout—come, there is room for both of us."

As Marcelite spoke she led the way a few paces among the pines, to where there were two trees straighter and taller than the others, and growing only a yard apart.

From one of them to the other sticks had been tied across with lassoes, a foot or more apart, and extending some fifteen feet up from the ground, where a couple of large limbs had been put across, forming a rest for the feet.

"Come up, Eloise, into my observatory," and Marcelite went readily up the crude ladder, but Mrs. Silvester feared to trust herself, saying she would grow dizzy.

Standing upon the two limbs, and holding to the branches of one of the pines, Marcelite was enabled to see over the country all around for miles, her position being above the ordinary growth of the timber.

"This is just grand, Eloise," she called down to Mrs. Silvester, and she added:

"I will report the situation exactly."

Mrs. Silvester gazed with admiration up at the brave girl and replied:

"I must insist upon your coming down when the fight begins, Marcelite, for you are in a most exposed position."

"No, indeed, for you know Indians are dead shots, never fire at random, and their arrows would not come up here, while their bullets will be directed at the soldiers you know."

"Well, I will stay here as long as you do there, Marcelite, so if your argument holds good I will be the one most in danger, the shots falling here."

"Eloise, I'll come the moment I think you are in any danger," and Marcelite turned and glanced about her.

The scene was a thrilling one, and appalling as well, for five hundred mounted warriors were in view in a glance of her eyes around a circle.

Those nearest the hill when first seen had held their position until those further off had advanced, until all were at an equal distance, not more than a third of a mile away.

They were a most formidable looking army, and Marcelite's glass revealed their painted faces, gorgeous feathers, gayly caparisoned ponies, bright *serapes* and long lances.

As she looked she suddenly cried:

"Oh, Eloise! they are coming!"

With her words came a wild chorus of yells, and then the thundering of hoofs as the red-skins came on in a mighty charge.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BEATEN BACK.

MRS. SILVESTER covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the scene which Marcelite beheld, and yet in her ears rung yells infernal, as though all the demons in Hades had broken out and were rushing over the earth.

The thunder of the hoofs on the hard ground, the snorting of the ponies and the yells of the red riders made up indeed an appalling situation, and Marcelite gazed upon the scene spellbound with awe.

It far surpassed her wildest expectations of what it would be.

In her short life she had witnessed one Indian battle, and several skirmishes, while she had also been in a scene where bandits had attacked the hacienda of her uncle, whom she was visiting in Mexico, so the *whir* of angry arrows and *whiz* of a bullet sent to kill were not new sounds to her.

But here was a spectacle that was grand, startling, terrible.

She heard no answering voice or shot from the soldiers, for the Indians who had rifles fired a few shots as they came on, and others sent a shower of arrows toward the hilltop.

But the bullets and arrows fell short, and as the charging red-men neared the foot of the hill they found, what they had evidently not counted upon, that the nature of the ground caused them to check their speed.

The wash of waters from the hill, in the rainy season, had worn ravines and gutters that could not be run over at full speed, and though here and there were smooth places and some kept up their pace, most of the braves had to draw rein.

Some of the ponies stumbled and fell, others came down on top of them, and in that way a half dozen groups of dismounted

warriors were seen, many of them and their horses more or less seriously hurt by their fall.

It was at this moment that Colonel Monastery's voice was heard commanding:

"Men, aim at those who have avoided the ravines, and throw no shot away."

"Fire!"

There followed the flash of nearly two score rifles, fired in a circle, and it seemed that every bullet found its mark in horse or rider.

"Repeating rifles now, and carbines fire at will!" cried Colonel Monastery, raising his own repeating rifle.

The others who had repeating rifles fired with the colonel, and the weapons rattled out merry but deadly music, and, by the time they were empty the carbines began to open again.

The first volley had checked the charging red skins momentarily, the repeating rifles had puzzled them, and the carbines opening so quickly again had made them waver wildly under the galling fire.

Then the repeating rifles began again, while Colonel Monastery called out:

"Half of you load, and the other half use your revolvers!"

Sharply and rapidly the revolvers rattled, and the Indians now being within range of them, they did deadly work until the troopers who had loaded their carbines again began to open fire, when, with terrific yells the mass of brutes and savage humanity rolled back like a wave from the beach, after firing one vicious volley at their foes, and fled to a distance for shelter from that merciless hail of leaden messengers, those who had the long-range repeating rifles pouring in their shots as long as a shot would tell.

In their retreat the Indians endeavored to carry off their wounded and dead, but the fire was so hot that they had to give it up, and when they had fled for safety there lay upon the field encircling the hills scores of dead and wounded ponies, half of which had lost a rider.

Spellbound at the sight, forgetting herself, danger and all, Marcelite had stood on her look-out viewing the scene, while at the foot of the trees Mrs. Silvester had sunk down upon her knees, praying for the safety of those who were to beat back that red horde of savages.

Bullets had rattled near Marcelite, one clipping a pine tree near her, and an arrow had caught in her skirt and hung there, yet she heeded them not in her admiration for the scene.

When she saw the Indians stagger, sway backward and fly, she gave a loud cry of triumph, waved her slouch cavalry hat, and called out, as she seemed to realize now where she was and what that defeat meant:

"Oh, Eloise! they are beaten back!"

"The red-skins are flying!"

"But how bravely they fought, for many fell, and—and—but what has been the cost to us?"

The color quickly fled from her face, leaving it very pale, and rapidly she descended the ladder of limbs and sticks to where Eloise Silvester stood.

"I dare not ask, Marcelite," she whispered.

"Come, we must know, and at once."

"They may need us," and Marcelite took Mrs. Silvester by the hand and led the way quickly to the breastworks.

A glad cry escaped her lips as she beheld her father, who said quickly:

"Your husband is safe, Mrs. Silvester, but Lieutenant Cole is wounded, and we have lost some of our brave men."

"I will come to you soon, for the red-skins are beaten back for the present."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN SUSPENSE.

"BEATEN back for the present," repeated Mrs. Silvester, as she went with Marcelite to the ravine where the wounded were to be taken.

"Lieutenant Cole, I am deeply pained to see you wounded," said Marcelite, as the young officer was seen, supported by two of the men.

"It is nothing serious, Miss Monastery,

only a flesh wound, though I am weak from the bleeding, which now fortunately is checked."

"I'll be all ready for the next charge," said the plucky officer and he dropped upon a blanket spread for him.

The wound was in his left shoulder, but the corporal, acting as surgeon, had extracted the bullet and checked the flow of blood.

He then quickly dressed the wound, and turned to several wounded soldiers who had been brought in, mostly hurt with arrows.

"Our loss is three killed, a scout and two soldiers, and Lieutenant Cole and seven men wounded, fortunately none of them seriously, while in return we gave the red skins a very severe lesson," said Colonel Monastery, as he came to the ravine.

"It was a glorious victory, father; but can we do nothing for the wounded Indians?"

"No, Marcelite, nothing, for did we leave the works they would charge again upon us."

"We had a dozen horses also killed, and others wounded, and the latter I ordered killed, so all will be dragged upon the works to strengthen them; but Mr. Cole, I wish to congratulate you that your wound is no worse and to compliment you upon your conspicuous bravery to-day."

"Your husband also, Mrs. Silvester, won the highest praise, though he escaped a wound, and in fact, every man behaved nobly."

"It was a grand fight, father—I never believed such a scene possible as the one I witnessed."

"You witnessed?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I was up a tree, so to speak, and saw it all," and Marcelite led her father to her lookout.

"I forbid your doing such a foolhardy thing again, my child, for when we risked life to defend ourselves and comrades, yes, and you and Eloise, you deliberately risked your life from what I can only look upon as idle curiosity, and—why here is an arrow now hanging in your dress—oh, Marcelite! what have you not escaped," and the voice of the strong man trembled.

"I'll not do so again, father, only—only—I did wish to see it all, and I was not a bit afraid," meekly said Marcelite.

"I'll vouch for that, for she stood nobly at her post, colonel—but here comes Seldon, another one to scold you, Marcelite," and Mrs. Silvester sprang forward to meet her husband, who called out:

"We gave them a lesson, Eloise, did we not?"

"I only hope they will profit by it, but they will not," she answered.

"Not altogether; but, colonel, did you notice how the chiefs pointed upward, as though looking over the pines?"

"It bothered me as to what they meant, and I saw them aiming there too."

"It was at this silly child of mine, Silvester, for look there."

"Where, sir?"

"At my roost," said Marcelite meekly, and she pointed to the improvised ladder.

"That was my lookout and now I'm scolded because my woman's curiosity got the better of me; but I won't offend again, dear papa."

The captain hastily ran up the ladder and called out:

"A grand view, yet a dangerous one, for there are several arrows sticking in the limbs here and some bullet marks as well."

"Miss Marcelite, you are a plucky girl to stand here and witness that fight," and the captain's description caused the colonel to ascend to the lookout.

"It is a splendid view, and I will place two men on watch here, and let the rest rest."

"But they will come upon us after night-fall, Silvester."

"I feel sure of it, sir."

"We can do no more than strengthen our works all we can, distribute the ammunition and keep the best men on watch."

"Yes, sir, the three scouts outside, so as to hasten in and give us warning."

"Yes, that will be to our advantage, but the work of beating them back will be harder by night than by day."

"I know how red-skins hate to fight at night, and hope that this will hold good here, sir, at least until dawn."

"It will not, I fear, for they know that we are in a tight place and not so very far from the fort; yes, they may have seen Wild Bill going for help, so I am sure that they will attack to-night, so we must not be caught napping," and the two officers descended from the perch, and Colonel Monastery having ordered a couple of men to go up there as guards, he went with the captain to have supper with the ladies, Lieutenant Cole also joining them, though he looked very pale yet said he was ready for duty when the time came again.

When nightfall came the men sent a request to Marcelite to sing, and getting out her guitar she did so for more than an hour, after which the camp became as quiet as the grave.

Thus several hours passed away when in ran the three scouts from their different advance posts and reported:

"They are coming for another charge!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

WILD BILL TO THE RESCUE.

At the report of the scouts every man drew a long breath and nerved himself for the worst.

The scouts said that the Indians were coming along on foot, leading their horses, to get over the rough ground where they had met disaster in the afternoon, for in the night they would not be seen, and once over they could charge up the hill at full speed and carry the works.

Colonel Monastery's first duty was to send Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester to the cover of the ravine, and then make a quick circuit of the works telling the men to aim their rifles about where the ponies were, and await the order to fire.

Though suffering with his wound, Lieutenant Cole was again at his post ready to do or die, and the wounded men who were able to hold a rifle were also on hand.

A few minutes of intense silence in the darkness was broken by the loud command in Colonel Monastery's voice.

"Ready, men!"

"Fire!"

There were the flashes of two score shots, and instantly the rattle of the repeating rifles.

The blaze of the guns lighted up the scene and then, all around the hill the ground was black with Indians, surprised by being discovered, staggered by the terrible fire, which cut down many in spite of the darkness, and mounting in hot haste to rush on up the hill.

It was a momentary check, and this gave the troopers time to reload and fire again in a volley that also told, while as the charge began the repeating rifles were loaded for another sound.

The work was done calmly, rapidly, and the result was deadly; but the red-skins were desperate in their haste and fury and now being mounted and moving, came on with the wildest, most appalling yells.

The command then came:

"Every other man use revolvers, and the rest load your carbines!"

A cheer was the answer and the rattle of the revolvers began, and the aim was as true as could be under the circumstances.

Horses and riders went down, diabolical yells rent the air, the whirring of arrows, the whistling of bullets, for the Indians were firing now, the trampling of hoofs, snorting of steeds, cheers of the soldiers and the red flashes of the weapons made up a scene that was diabolically terrible.

Up to the barrier came the horde of savage humanity, and each man behind it nerved himself to die, for by sheer force of numbers the red-men were coming over to crush them.

But when the braves in the lead, finding that they could not force their ponies over the barricade, were throwing themselves from their saddles to clamber over themselves, there came from off on the plain the ringing call of a bugle that rose above the din of the mad conflict, and in an instant all was silence.

What that call meant the Indians at the base of the hill knew but too well, for it was heard again, and in the moment of silence was heard the thunder of hundreds of rushing,

iron-shod hoofs and a cheer from many throats, accompanied by the clash of steel.

A wild cry of warning came from the Indians down upon the plain, which those almost over the barrier knew but too well, and rushing back to their horses they leaped upon them and fled for their lives, all running in one direction, so as to keep together and present a solid front to their pursuers.

There was not a moment now to stop for dead or wounded, for the mighty roar of hoofs told them that they had no small force to deal with.

With hope in their breasts the little garrison resumed the fight and sent a leaden hail after the retreating red skins, while Colonel Monastery and Captain Stewart, mounting their horses, for half of the animals yet remained alive, called to a few troopers to follow them, and riding out of the barrier, at a break left on purpose, they went down to join their rescuers in the pursuit.

In advance, giving his wild war-cry, rode Wild Bill, while behind him came Major Basil Benson with three troops of cavalry, numbering two hundred men.

It was true that the pace set for them by Wild Bill had caused them to scatter over miles of the plain, while the camp equipage on pack-horses was far behind; but there were over a hundred fighting men up in the charge and others coming on rapidly from the rear each minute.

"Ho, Wild Bill, my brave fellow, we owe our lives to your hard riding—who is in command?" cried Colonel Monastery, as the scout dashed up to where the little force from the hill stronghold met him.

"Major Vernon Canfield, sir, and we have two hundred men."

"You will need them, for the Indians are five hundred strong, though now on the retreat—oh, major, I am delighted to see you, for you are most welcome," and Colonel Monastery grasped the major's hand, the latter replying:

"And I to see you, colonel; but Wild Bill deserves the credit of our timely arrival."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WILD BILL'S RIDE FOR LIFE.

The pursuit of the Indians was continued for miles, when at the crossing of a stream, which they could not cross rapidly, owing to the descent to the ford being a narrow cut in a cliff, the cavalry under Major Canfield had come upon them and poured in some telling volleys from their carbines, which piled up braves and ponies by the score.

With this terrible blow, and the picking off of stragglers in their flight, added to their being driven away from their camps and losing their outfit, and the losses they had met with in charging the stronghold, not to speak of their disappointment in losing their prey, the Comanches continued their retreat to their village, a very much demoralized body of braves.

When he returned to the stronghold Major Canfield found that he was just in time for breakfast.

He had left half his force at the river to bury the dead, and bring back his own wounded, for the troopers had not escaped scathless, and then he pressed on, with Wild Bill still as his guide, to see what loss Colonel Monastery and his party had sustained, for the colonel had not continued on in the chase after the red-skins, there being plenty for him to look after in his own camp.

His loss had been half a dozen more troopers slain, and quite a number wounded, but the surgeon with the relief-party had halted there, and with his assistance was doing good service.

Major Canfield was most warmly welcomed by Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester, both of whom had met him before, and he sat down to breakfast with them, with an appetite which he said would do full justice to the meal.

"We were looking for your arrival at the fort, colonel," he said, when the lookout reported a horseman coming on like mad.

"As he neared the fort his horse was seen to be staggering, and soon after dropped dead: but his rider caught on his feet, and came on as swift as a deer.

"Reaching the fort, I met him, and he called out:

"Colonel Monastery and his party are corralled by hundreds of Indians.

"Half an hour's delay in reaching them may cost their lives—I will guide you to them, sir."

"I had never then met Wild Bill, and so I asked him who he was, and his reply was characteristic of the man:

"Men call me Wild Bill, sir; but I'll introduce myself when I have more time, as now you have not a moment to lose."

"I at once ordered three troops into the saddle, with picked horses and what food could be prepared without delay, and went to General Carr with Wild Bill to report what I had done.

"The general urged the greatest haste, especially when Wild Bill said that Miss Monastery and Mrs. Silvester were with you, and in just twenty minutes we left the fort."

"You were prompt indeed, my dear major, and it was that which saved us; but Wild Bill returned with you?"

"Oh, yes, sir, he got a fresh horse, put his own saddle and bridle on him, and he set the pace for us.

"I had to check him time and again, for he went at a pace that has stretched my troopers over twenty miles of trail, some just now getting in, I noticed.

"But it was well that he did, for we were not one minute too soon."

"You were not, sir, for five minutes more would have ended it.

"But let me thank you again, Major Canfield, and congratulate you upon your promotion, for I believe your present rank is only a few weeks old."

"Yes, sir, and my wiping out of the Mexican bandits got me the promotion, I believe, when really it was that strange man with me who deserved the credit—the Texan, Adrian Valdos, I refer to."

"Yes, and we owe our safety to him, also, sir."

"Wild Bill was telling me of him as we came along, colonel.

"This frontier produces some very remarkable men, but I know of none more remarkable than that Texan."

"I have a scheme to propose to you regarding him, Major Canfield, when we have time to talk it over, for I have promised him a lieutenantancy in the army, and I need your aid to get it."

"I will do all in my power most gladly, sir, to bring about his getting a commission, for if any man ever won one he is that man; but now I must look after my wounded, and have you go on to the fort under an escort."

"Oh, no, we will wait and go on with the command, for I have wounded also to look after, one of your gallant officers by the way, Lieutenant Cameron Cole."

"Not seriously, I hope, sir?"

"No, but he would not give up, and was on duty all the time though suffering greatly."

"Cole is a plucky fellow, and I have good news for him, for Lane has been made captain of my old troop and Cole goes up to first lieutenant in his stead."

"That will indeed be good news for him, a balm of Gilead for his wound; but he deserves it," said the colonel, and he went with Major Canfield to visit the young officer and carry him the tidings of his promotion.

As there was no water very near the hill, it was decided to bury the dead at once, and push on with the wounded to a stream ten miles distant and there camp for the night, for then the pursuers of the Indians would have returned, Captain Lane being in command of them.

This was done, and the next day the command pulled out for Fort D—.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WILD BILL'S LONE TRAIL.

The little party that had been so long on a most dangerous trail, passing through hardship and perils, hopes and fears, came in sight of Fort D— early in the afternoon of the day following their departure from what Marcelite had named "Fort Forlorn Hope."

The colonel, his party and immediate body-guard under Lieutenant Cole, who still stuck to the saddle in spite of his suffering, went

on in advance, leaving Major Canfield to follow on with the wounded at a slower pace.

Wild Bill rode ahead as guide, calm, cynical and stern, with no trace on his handsome face of what he had passed through.

When they came near the fort the garrison was under arms to receive them and the huzzas they received showed how they were welcomed, for Major Canfield had sent a courier back to report to General Carr just what the situation had been.

A cottage had already been prepared for Colonel Monastery, and Mrs. Silvester and her husband were to share it with them, and General Carr escorted them to their new home, while Lieutenant Cole went to his bachelor quarters with words of praise for his bravery heard upon every side.

With no show of vanity Wild Bill went quietly about the fort, as modest as a school-girl, though he could not but know that every eye was upon him, that every one knew his record, and his deeds were the talk of every one.

He had gone to the quarters of the chief of scouts at the fort, and had given it out as his intention to start upon his return to the northward, as soon as he could find a couple of horses to suit him, for he intended carrying an extra animal along.

These horses were not long in being found, for Colonel Monastery was also on the lookout for them, and the third day after their arrival at the fort Wild Bill was surprised by seeing two splendid animals brought to his quarters, one the gift of the colonel and Marcelite, the other a present from Captain and Mrs. Silvester.

"The very two beauties I wanted to get, and offered the sutler big money for, only he said they were sold," said Wild Bill, gazing at the presents with the greatest admiration.

Having been thus mounted Wild Bill began to prepare for his journey, when the sutler informed him that his pack-saddle was already fully stored with provisions, blankets, ammunition and all that was necessary, Miss Monastery having herself packed it and paid for all the things.

"I must get out of this, or they'll present me with a suit of clothes, for that is all I lack now," said Wild Bill.

"There is an extra suit of fine buckskin, sash, hat and all in your pack, Wild Bill, for Lieutenant Cole had it made for himself, but it was too large for him, and he said it would just fit you, so I was to put it in your outfit, and it will suit you as though made for you—just try it."

Wild Bill put the suit on, and though a trifle too fancy, he could not but feel that it was just what he wanted and went over in it to thank the lieutenant for his kindness.

Then he made his way to call upon Colonel Monastery, and thanked him and all for his magnificent presents, after which he said:

"Now, colonel, I am ready for the back trail, sir, so if you have any dispatches or letters to send back, I start at noon to-day, sir, for I wish to camp in Fort Forlorn Hope to-night."

"I have some dispatches for you, Wild Bill, and so has General Carr, but I hate to see you take that long trail alone, and am very sorry no one is going that way with you."

"I don't mind it, sir, for I can take better care of one, than I can of a number."

Soon after he received the dispatches, and bidding good-by to those whom he had served so well, and whose friendship he had won, he went to his quarters, mounted one horse, and with the other in lead, rode out of the fort.

His going had become known, and the soldiers had assembled to give him a send-off in a parting cheer.

He raised his sombrero with graceful courtesy, and those who looked upon his darkly bronzed, bearded face, could not trace one sign of anxiety there about the future, no dread for the long and dangerous trail he was to follow.

On he went until he disappeared in the distance from those who still watched him, for many predicted that he would never be heard of again.

Marcelite also saw him away, and heard

the prophecies of its being his last trail, and she mused.

"Somehow I do not feel that he is doomed, for such a man as he can conquer untold dangers."

"I shall hear from him before many weeks, I feel, and he will tell me that he kept his promise and went to the lone ranch of that most mysterious man, Adrian Valdos."

So on his way Wild Bill went, with no dread for his own safety, and ready to face every danger that crossed his trail.

He reached the scene of the desperate fight for life just at sunset, and unmindful of the haunting specters that might linger there, fed his horses with feed brought from the fort, and spreading his blankets, ate his supper and then sat down to enjoy one of a box of cigars which Major Canfield had given him.

At last he finished his cigar, and throwing himself down upon his blankets was soon fast asleep, feeling assured that there was no red-skin near save those in their graves a few feet from his lonely camp.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

THE night passed without anything to disturb the scout's slumber, and, as there was no water there, it being a dry camp, Wild Bill mounted and rode on to the stream where Major Canfield had had his battle with the Indians, to have his breakfast there.

Good water, good grass and some wood for a fire was what he wanted, and that he found in abundance.

He had crossed to the other side, where there was timber, staked his horses out and was picking up an armful of wood, when he started, stopped short, the wood fell from his arms and he had his revolver in his hand all in an instant.

What had startled him was an Indian lying in a clump of bushes.

But he did not draw trigger, for the words checked him, for they were:

"Let the pale-face kill."

"The Eagle Wing can die like a Comanche."

"What! you are the Eagle Wing, and you are wounded?"

"Yes, me Eagle Wing."

"Let the pale-face kill me."

"Oh no, for I have heard of you, my good red brother, for you are the friend of the Lone Medicine-man, the messenger who warned Colonel Monastery of his danger the day I rode to the fort for aid."

"Yes, me the red brother of Lone Medicine Chief—me tell big white chief of Comanche on his trail—then come to my people—see, me hurt heap bad."

The scout had replaced his revolver in his belt, and kneeling down by the side of the red-skin he said:

"I am your friend, Pard Comanche, for you did Colonel Monastery a favor I will not forget."

"Let me look at your wound."

The wound was a severe one, a bullet having passed through the foot, which was inflamed and swollen terribly.

"I'll fix you all right soon: Eagle Wing, but that is an ugly wound, but you look half starved."

"Eagle Wing no eat for two, three, four days—have heap suffer."

"Poor fellow; but you are all right now I am here to help you," and the scout quickly built a fire, put his coffee-pot on, with a large tin-cup of water, with which to bathe the wound.

He then prepared breakfast, broiled venison steak, bacon, toasted crackers and coffee, and first fed the half-famished red-skin, who ate with an appetite that showed how he had suffered for food.

Breakfast being over, Wild Bill went to his saddle-pocket for that which he never went without—a little leather case containing lint, bandages, several surgical instruments, a bottle of arnica, another of witch hazel and several other necessities that could not be gotten along without in frontier life.

He found not far away the dead body of the Indian's pony, with his saddle, bridle and traps upon it which Colonel Monastery had given him.

Wolves ran snarling away from the carcass at his approach, and birds of the air took flight also, so he stripped the torn body of the horse of its trappings and carried them to where the Indian lay calmly watching him.

"Me come here keep wolf from eat Eagle Wing," he explained, as the scout returned.

"Poor fellow, you have had a hard time of it."

"You were shot the day of the fight at the fort."

"Yes, pony wounded, Eagle Wing, too."

"Pony fall on Eagle Wing and braves run away fast and leave him."

"Soldiers no come here, so not see Eagle Wing, and he stay here to die, for he no walk."

Spreading the blankets of the Indian upon the ground and making him comfortable, the scout then took the tepid water and began to bathe the wounded foot.

The swelling gradually subsided, and he could see that the bullet had passed entirely through the foot, while, using his probe, he was glad to find that the bone, though injured, was not broken.

After bathing it for a long while, he bound it up securely, and saw that Eagle Wing had dropped off into deep slumber.

"It was a close call for him, but I guess he'll be all right."

"I'll go now and catch that stray pony I saw a while ago in the timber."

He soon found the pony—a good animal, whose Indian rider had doubtless been killed, for he still had his saddle and bridle on—and a throw of his lasso secured him.

"You are not a bad pony and will carry the Eagle Wing well, so I won't have to double the weight on my led horse," muttered Wild Bill as he led the pony back to his little camp.

Eagle Wing awoke at his coming, and said, as he recognized the pony:

"It was the Chief Panther's pony."

"Him heap good pony."

"Well, he is yours, Eagle Wing, and I guess if I doctor your foot all day you will be able to ride to-morrow."

"Me go now, heap some better."

"No, you need rest and food before starting, and your foot will be much better to-morrow, while I am not in a great hurry, as the dispatches I carry are not urgent, for I asked the general and the colonel."

"Where go?"

"Eagle Wing, I'll tell you just where I am going, and you are the very red-skin to help me," said Wild Bill with sudden earnestness.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RED-SKIN GUIDE.

IT had suddenly occurred to Wild Bill that he had come upon the very one to help him in the work he had on hand.

He had acted wholly from sympathy and kindness of heart toward a foe, but now he remembered that being the friend of the Texan the Eagle Wing doubtless knew where he dwelt.

He simply had an idea of the locality, from what the scout had told him, and he knew that it might take him a day or more to find it.

The Indian would doubtless guide him directly to it, he felt certain.

So he said:

"The Eagle Wing knows the tepee of the Lone Medicine Chief?"

"Eagle Wing know."

"I was going to see the Lone Chief, for I wish to talk with him, and I want the Eagle Wing to guide me to his tepee."

"Eagle Wing go with whitt scalp-taker."

"All right, I'll fix you up so that you can ride all right, we will go slow, and when we leave the tepee of the Lone Medicine Chief the Eagle Wing can go back to his people."

"No take me among pale-faces to kill me?"

"Not I, for I am not that kind of a man."

"If I found the Eagle Wing was my worst foe, I would help him and let him go his way; but if he was to meet me in battle again, then he would have to take care that I did not raise his scalp, for a sick Injun and a well Injun are two very different things to me."

The Eagle Wing seemed to master just what the scout meant, and smiled, while he held out his hand and said:

"White hunter heap brave, heap good."

"Eagle Wing white hunter's red brother."

As it was nearing dinner time Wild Bill cooked another meal and the Indian once more ate heartily.

Soon after he dressed his wound again, and then the scout took a little walk to bring down some game.

After a short while he brought down a deer and soon after a wild turkey, so, loaded with game he returned to his camp and getting out his fishing-tackle began to fish in the stream, Eagle Wing aiding him in this sport, and proving himself an expert fisherman too.

Thus the afternoon passed, and the Indian greatly relished his supper of fried fish, crackers and coffee, Wild Bill also doing the same.

Before going to sleep the wound was dressed again, and when Wild Bill looked at it the next morning he was glad to see that his treatment had greatly reduced the swelling and inflammation, while Eagle Wing said that it no longer gave him much pain.

"Do you think you can ride now, Eagle Wing?"

"Me ride all right."

So the Indian pony was saddled and bridled, and the Eagle Wing was aided to mount, his wounded foot being placed in a blanket swing fastened to the horn of the saddle.

Then the scout mounted and with his pack-horse in lead the trail was taken down the stream for the ranch of Adrian Valdos.

Wild Bill took the direction the Indian told him to take, and halted early for a nooning and rested for a long while, for he was most careful of the red-skin to whom he had been such a good Samaritan.

He again made an early camp when night was coming on, and the Eagle Wing seemed to understand and appreciate just why he did so, for he could not have been more kind to a child.

The next morning both were glad to see that the wound was steadily improving, and the Eagle Wing said:

"White hunter heap good medicine-man."

"Eagle Wing have him for brother."

"See Lone Medicine Chief tepee to-night."

"All right, and you can stay there until you get well."

"White hunter go north?"

"Yes."

"Eagle Wing go with him along Comanche trail."

"Comanche heap mad now; see White Hunter kill him; but Eagle Wing go, and no kill him if see him."

"You are a brick, Injun, and no mistake; but I take chances always, and if I couldn't fight my way through those I could not give the slip, why it would lose me my hair; but yet I'll be glad of your good efforts in my behalf, after I have had a talk with the Texan."

Another long halt was made at noon, and a couple of hours after the trail was continued Wild Bill said:

"We are getting into a mighty nice country, Eagle Wing."

"Yes, Lone Medicine Chief country."

"Him have plenty pony, plenty cattle—heap rich."

Wild Bill observed that the country was well watered, rolling and timbered, while the grass was plentiful.

When the sun was yet an hour above the western horizon, they ascended a rise which revealed a beautiful valley, sheltered by high ranges of hills upon either side.

Along the base of each range flowed a stream, winding down the valley until they came together, forming one stream.

In the fork of the two was a hill, sloping up the valley, but abrupt on each side overhanging the streams, and upon its summit, which was timbered, were several adobe cabins.

In the forks of the streams, traversing over a space of many hundreds of acres, were herds of cattle and a large drove of ponies, among which were a number of large horses.

"Ah! there is a ranch," cried Wild Bill in surprise.

"It tepee of Lone White Chief."

"Well, he certainly has pitched his tent in a beautiful spot, and one he can defend."

"He has fine cattle there, too; yes, and a splendid lot of ponies and horses."

"I guess he is pretty well fixed, and the only thing that surprises me is that you Comanches don't make short work of him."

"No, Comanche love Lone Medicine Chief."

"Has he got any pards with him?"

The Comanche held up five fingers to indicate the number, and said:

"So many braves."

"Well we will give him a call, Eagle Wing, though he never invited me to do so, and see how he welcomes us," said Wild Bill, urging his horse forward once more.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LONE RANCH.

THE remark of Wild Bill the Comanche did not seem to wholly understand, and it appeared to dawn upon him suddenly that he had done wrong in guiding the scout to the lone ranch of the Texan, for he said quickly:

"The white hunter is the friend of Lone Medicine Chief?"

"Oh, yes, I am his friend."

"If white hunter want to harm him, Eagle Wing heap rather die than bring him here."

"Rest easy, Eagle Wing, for I am the friend of the Lone Medicine Chief—do we cross here?" and they had now come to the ford.

"Yes, cross river—heap good place—bad place yonder," and he motioned up and down the stream.

What the Comanche meant by a heap good and bad crossing the scout soon discovered, as he saw that the ford was about the only one as far as his eye ranged up and down the stream.

The banks were fringed with trees on the ranch side, but barren on the other, and the ascent on the shore they were approaching was steep and rugged.

At the top of the steep, short hill was a barrier, to keep the cattle from crossing, but this Wild Bill took down for them to pass through, putting it up again behind them.

As they turned toward the ranch Wild Bill saw a horseman in the timber, watching them, but the quick eye of the Comanche had already seen him, and he raised both hands above his head, and thus rode forward.

Nearing the timber Wild Bill was struck with its parklike beauty, and saw that the ranch was a pleasant home there in those dangerous wilds.

He soon discovered that there was an adobe structure of considerable size, and he recognized it as one of the old Spanish Missions still to be found through that country, it having once been a chapel, with the out-buildings surrounding it.

To one side was a little cemetery, long since crumbled to decay, and the best houses of the Mission had been taken to dwell in.

The horseman who was watching their approach calmly awaited their coming, his rifle lying across his saddle, and ready for use if need be.

When Wild Bill had taken in the ranch and its surroundings, he turned his attention to the horseman.

He was a large man, sat his horse well, and dressed in half-Mexican, half-cowboy fashion.

His face was dark and he wore his hair long, but he was an American in appearance.

"Ho, Eagle Wing, you are off your trail, and who is your pard?" he called out, as the two approached.

"Eagle Wing heap bad hurt, come to see Lone Medicine Chief, bring pale-face brother to see him."

The ranchman glanced at the wounded foot of the Indian, in its blanket support, and then at the scout and said:

"I think I know you."

"Are you not Wild Bill?"

"That is what I am called; but do I fail to recall an old pard?"

"No, I only saw you once several years ago up in the Mormon country, but you have a face not easily forgotten."

"Do you know the chief?"

"If you mean Mr. Adrian Valdos I know him, and owe him some favors I would like to repay."

"I came by here to see him."

"You are the first visitor he has had, and I am sorry he is away."

"Then he is not at home?" quickly said Wild Bill.

"No, he is away hunting, for he goes often on long hunting expeditions, but you are welcome, and I will try and entertain you, for I am the chief cowboy of the ranch."

"You are very kind, and I will accept your hospitality, for the night at least; but when do you expect Mr. Valdos?"

"It is hard to tell, for he may be gone a week or more, and perhaps return to-night; but come and we will entertain you, for I have four comrades here with me."

He led the way to the buildings, and Wild Bill was asked to dismount, while several fine-looking fellows came forward, the leader saying:

"This is Wild Bill, pards."

"You all know him by name."

The men gave the scout a cordial welcome, showing no curiosity as to his coming, and all expressed regret at their chief being absent.

It was on the tip of Wild Bill's tongue to tell them how their chief had served him, but he thought he had best say nothing about it, as they stated that the ranchero had been home two days before and had gone again on another hunt, a favorite sport of his, and they did not speak of his having told them of meeting the scout or others on the trail.

All of them seemed to know the Comanche well, and to like him, for they helped him dismount, and the leader, whom his comrades called Rio Grande Ralph, said:

"I've learned enough medicine and scientific cutting from the doctor, Eagle Wing, to fix your foot up in fine shape, though I guess Wild Bill has cared pretty well for it."

They all spoke of the ranchero as the "doctor," and "Doctor Chief," and appeared to be much attached to him.

"We'll give you the doctor's tepee, Wild Bill, and you'll find it comfortable," Rio Grande Ralph said, and he opened the door in the rear of the old Mission Chapel, in which there was a large room, with a door leading into a second one.

These two were in good condition, but the rest of the old chapel was a ruin.

In the other buildings near the ranchmen had their quarters, and Eagle Wing was made comfortable in one of them.

Glancing about the ranch Wild Bill saw half a dozen large and savage dogs, but they seemed to consider his coming all right and were not in a hostile mood toward him.

His horses had been taken by one of the ranchmen and cared for, and he was told that supper would be ready after awhile and he must make himself perfectly at home.

He looked around the large room he had entered and was surprised at what he saw.

Handsome woven blankets were upon the adobe floor as mats; and the walls were hung with paintings, engravings and Mexican and Indian ornaments.

There was a table and a large easy-chair, a couple of shelves filled with books, an easel with a half-finished painting upon it, a medicine-case in which were bottles and surgical instruments, and rifles, revolvers and knives hanging upon brackets.

The room was a most attractive one, looking more like an artist's studio than a ranchman's home.

The adjoining room was used as a sleeping apartment, and it too was fitted up most comfortably.

"Well, this is a home in the wilderness," muttered Wild Bill as he glanced about him.

CHAPTER XLI.

A DEEPENING MYSTERY.

"WELL, there is nothing hidden here, for I am given the chief's quarters, and made perfectly at home, so I can see nothing that would indicate anything wrong going on."

"Still, I shall sleep with one eye open, for I cannot understand just how it was that the doctor, as they call him, demanded the life of the Mexican. Elmo the outlaw chief, and afterward showed that he was the friend of the Comanches."

"It is beyond me to find this out, but I'll keep trailing the mystery until something turns up."

So mused Wild Bill as he stood looking about him in the ranchero's rooms.

He was not long in discovering that it was the home of no ordinary man, yet why should such a man, one of refinement, education, and with a profession, seek a home in that wilderness, was the question he could not answer.

It would seem, judging from his standpoint, of men he had met on the border with every claim to lead a different life, hiding themselves in a wild life, that they were fugitives from justice, had committed some crime that had driven them from their fellows who knew them.

But had such a man as Adrian Valdos appeared to be, hidden himself there to escape the law, or just punishment?

Finding conveniences in the room to make his toilet, Wild Bill did so and then glanced over the books on the shelves.

He saw that some of them were medical works, others historical and biographical, while still more were scientific, and a few of lighter literature.

The paintings on the wall were by an artistic hand and of scenes on the frontier, so that the scout deemed them the work of the ranchero, as there was an unfinished sketch on the easel.

He saw writing materials upon the table, and beheld several maps excellently well-drawn, and evidently of that part of the country, while he noticed in one corner a surveyor's stand and instruments.

There was a large scrap-book of pressed wild flowers, with their botanical names under each, and hanging just over the table was a frame containing two large photographs, delicately colored by some artistic hand.

One was of a beautiful maiden of eighteen or twenty, the other a handsome young man in the uniform of an officer of the Mexican cavalry.

One glance at the face, and Wild Bill said:

"Ah, I think I have his secret now, for this is his likeness, and this must be the one he loved—yes, and lost, else why did he leave her."

"It is the same old story of a love affair, I guess, for we all noticed his extremely sad face."

"But he must be a Mexican instead of a Texan, after all, for he wears here the uniform of a captain of Mexican lancers."

"How handsome he is, and how beautiful is the face of this woman," and Wild Bill gazed admiringly at the picture before him.

Then he walked out into the plaza and met Rio Grande Ralph coming to take him to supper, for the men had their meals in one of the adobe cabins not far away.

"I guess you saved that Injun's life for him, sir, for he had a bad wound of it; but it is coming around all right now, and I took out the little pieces of bone the bullet chipped off," said the ranchman, and he ushered Wild Bill into the cabin, where the others were already assembled, Eagle Wing looking very smiling over the prospect of a good supper and the fact that his foot was on the high road to recovery.

"Take the doctor's seat, sir," said Rio Grande Ralph, and Wild Bill was surprised to find that the table service was of china.

But the supper surprised him more, for there were potatoes, fried chicken, hot biscuit, milk, butter and coffee.

"We have a vegetable garden here, and our own cows, so we have plenty of milk and butter, for the chief will live like a gentleman," said Rio Grande Ralph.

The meal was heartily enjoyed, and after it was over and the dishes washed up, Rio Grande Ralph got down his guitar, another one his flute, a third his violin, and Wild Bill felt that he had never listened to sweeter music, while Eagle Wing appeared also delighted.

They also sung ballads, and for a couple of hours Wild Bill was charmed by his very hospitable hosts.

"And you dwell here in seeming content?" said the scout, anxious to lead the men on to talk.

"Oh, yes, though at times it is a trifle lonely."

"We have the cattle to look after, the garden to plant, horses to break for the market, and once a year drive the herds to where we have men come to buy them."

"The doctor reads to us a great deal, we have our music, fishing, hunting and in fact get along well."

"And neither the bandits or the Indians seem to trouble you?" suggested Wild Bill.

"No, they do us no harm," was the reply, and the hospitality he had received, and trust shown in him prevented Wild Bill from questioning the ranchmen any further, for he did not wish to appear to be prying into the lone ranchero's affairs.

CHAPTER XLII.

A RIDE OF PERIL.

WILD BILL felt that in coming to the ranch of the Texan, the mystery hanging over him had if anything, deepened.

He had found the ranchman just what he had said he was, living with a few cowboys on his ranch, and where he was not disturbed by Indians or outlaws.

He had also discovered that his surroundings were not of a low order, but with every evidence of refinement about him, and that his men were devoted to him, while he beheld his likeness in the uniform of a Mexican captain of cavalry, though he had said he was a Texan.

That night Wild Bill slept well, and awoke to find a tempting breakfast ready for him.

Rio Grande Ralph had already again dressed the Indian's wounded foot, and Eagle Wing said that he would be able to walk in a few weeks he felt sure.

Stating that he could not remain to await the doctor, Wild Bill also expressed his intention of departing soon after breakfast.

"Which way do you go from here, pard?" he was asked.

"To the northward, into New Mexico and then on to my old fort where I am chief of scouts," was the answer.

"You are new to this country, I take it?"

"Yes, I was at Fort D—once before my last trip there."

"Are you aware that you have to go through the Indian country on your trail northward?"

"Oh yes."

"You do not appear to be much disturbed by it?"

"Well, you see I live in a land of danger, and if I have to face trouble I do not worry over it until the time to meet it."

"A good idea; but, pard, as good a scout as you are and brave a man, I do not believe you can get through the trail to the north of us; for the red-skins just now are in a very ugly mood, and they are scouting everywhere."

"Should you build a camp-fire they will see it, and your trail they will notice and follow, while you would run upon them time and again."

"It is not a pleasant picture you are painting for me, pard; but Eagle Wing has promised to pilot me through."

"He could do so under ordinary circumstances; but not now when the whole tribe is roaming about and as ugly in humor as Satan."

"He could offer no excuse for you, and in fact if the Indians doubted him, both of you would have to go."

"It will be a long trail for me to flank around."

"Yes, and with the same danger in flanking, so I will be your guide through the Indian country."

"You, pard?" and Wild Bill looked at Rio Grande Ralph with surprise.

"Yes, for Eagle Wing must remain here and get well, or he will lose that foot of his, perhaps his life."

"You are a friend of the doctor and so I will guide you through the Comanche country."

"And you can do so?"

"Oh, yes."

"They will see the trail all the same."

"Oh yes, I shall make no effort to avoid them, but go as the crow flies as near as I can."

"Do you mean that the Indians will not harm you?"

"I mean just that, so you are safe; but you must not go as Wild Bill, but as one of

the doctor's men, a new man, as they know all of us."

"I can rig you out all right; but I wish you could stay until the doctor returns."

"It will be impossible."

"Then I will be ready in half an hour, for I will take a pack-horse along too, and plenty of provisions so that we will not suffer."

"I have no claim upon you for you to do this for me."

"You have the claim of humanity, and you would lose your life sure if I did not go along."

Half an hour after the two rode away from the ranch, each with a horse in lead, Wild Bill having left the pony for Eagle Wing, who parted from the scout with feelings of real regret.

Rio Grande Ralph was splendidly mounted, and he was dressed now in a Mexican suit, sombrero and all.

He led the way to the same ford, the only one he explained to Wild Bill where there was an entrance the peninsula of land on which the ranch was located.

Once across on the other shore he struck off on a bee-line across the country.

He set the pace at a fast walk and held it steadily for several hours, when they halted at a small stream for dinner.

Though nearing a locality where Indians would doubtless be roving about, he did not hesitate to build a fire and cook dinner.

"Can there be treachery at the bottom of all this?" mused Wild Bill, for the fact that he had no fear of the red-skins, or the outlaws that would raid across the Rio Grande, constantly flitted through the scout's mind, and he was sure that he entered upon a very perilous ride, under the guidance of one who might be leading him to his death.

CHAPTER XLIII.

RUNNING A DEATH GANTLET.

THE halt at noon was for an hour only, and the next camp was at sunset, not an Indian having been seen.

When the supper was over, Wild Bill saw that the Texan heaped wood on the fire, as though he wished it to burn all night, and then hung up near it, where it would be in full view of any one approaching the camp, a gayly-colored Mexican *serape*.

He made no comment, but felt sure that the *serape* was put up as a signal of some kind, and he remembered that during the day the Texan had worn the same blanket suspended from his shoulders.

Wild Bill went to his blankets with the firm determination to be on his guard against a surprise, or treachery, and slept with his rifle and revolvers under the blankets and close at hand to grasp in an instant's notice.

The night passed, however, without any incident, and when breakfast was being eaten, Wild Bill called out quickly as he sprang to his feet.

"Indians!"

"And they are coming on the jump."

The Texan did not even rise, but said:

"All right, let them come, for they see the signal and know we are not foes."

The Indians discovered by Wild Bill were a dozen in number, and were coming with their ponies in a gallop, having just come over a rise half a mile away.

"You do not fear them, you are sure?"

"Oh, no, they are all right."

"There are only a dozen, and we could wipe them out, if you think—"

"No, no, a shot at them would cost us our lives at once, for they are not alone."

"I told you that I would not avoid them, nor did I care to seek them; but they are coming, so let me tell you that there will be no trouble, and you will run the death gantlet in safety."

"I'll chance it, pard."

"Let me ask you if you think any of these Indians know you?"

"Well, I have made the acquaintance of the Comanches several times, but have not met them closer than revolver range, so I do not think they will recognize me."

"I hope not; but I must receive them now and let them clean up the remnant of our breakfast," and Rio Grande Ralph rose and faced the Indians as they came up.

They came with a rush, gave a war-

whoop, drew rein suddenly, and the chief leaping to the ground, first extended his hand to the Texan, who spoke to them in their own tongue, and he spoke it fluently.

Wild Bill saw that he was the object of conversation, and he nodded in a friendly way to the Indians, but was ready to draw his revolvers in a second if there came need for it.

"Pard, we must ask our red brothers to breakfast with us, so will you help out with the cooking?" said Rio Grande Ralph, turning to Wild Bill, who at once set to work to obey.

The Indians dismounted and all came forward and shook hands with Wild Bill, grunting forth their pleasure in meeting him.

He gave them a good breakfast, and when it was over he discovered that they were to serve as an escort, for having nothing to do they had an eye on the dinner and supper that the two white men were yet to have during the day.

"There is no help for it, pard; I had to ask them to go along, though they will breed a famine in our stores, I fear; but we will strike their village before supper and live on them, as we will stay there to-night."

"Stay in their village?" asked Wild Bill with surprise.

"Oh, yes, for you are in for it now, and will have to run the gantlet clean through, as far as I go with you, and then I will turn you over to one who will see you in safety to the old trail, where you will know your bearings."

"You are very kind, pard, but I don't just hanker after so much Indian society; but I'm not kicking, so just play the game to suit yourself and when I have a trump card I'll lay it down," and Wild Bill resigned himself to his fate be it what it might.

At the dinner that day the Texan was very sparing in what he got out of the pack, for he knew that if he set all he had before the dozen ravenous braves they would eat every morsel of it.

He did not halt long either, for he was anxious to reach the Indian village before night and save the draw upon his larder.

This he did, though the red-skins seemed disappointed not to have a supper while on the trail and tried to deceive the Texan as to the way, so as to make him camp; but he was too cunning for them for that and reached the Indian village before nightfall.

There were several thousand Indians in the village, and all turned out to welcome the visitors, causing Wild Bill to remark in a low tone:

"I am sorry we are so popular, pard."

The Texan laughed and made his way to the head chief's quarters, when he was at once made welcome, he and his strange comrade who little dreamed that they were entertaining a bitter foe unawares.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE SPECTER OF THE TRAIL.

WILD BILL, in spite of his iron nerve, could not but feel his helplessness there in that Indian village.

He saw that the Texan felt at home, that he appeared to be respected by the Indians, and the chief held a long conversation with him, but yet he could not but realize that a very thin barrier was between him and death.

But he did not show any anxiety, and rolling himself in his blankets, after he had eaten the not very tempting Indian supper, sought to forget his hopes and fears in sleep.

This his will power enabled him to do, and he did not awake until morning, when the Texan was all ready to start upon his way.

They were to be escorted by their friends of the day before, it looked like, with as many more to keep them company, but the cunning of Rio Grande Ralph came to his aid here and he got rid of them in some way unknown to Wild Bill, but which won his admiration.

That morning they met several roving bands of Indians, but did not delay long with them, as Rio Grande pressed steadily on and when they camped at noon he said:

"I will have to leave you here, Pard Wild Bill, for you will hardly meet any more red-skins, though it is possible that you may."

"I wish you to wear this *serape* over your shoulders, however, and when you camp to-night hang it up in the bright firelight."

"This trail will lead you to the river, which, when you cross, keep up the right bank of until you strike the trail which you are familiar with and then it is plain sailing with you."

"I had hoped to find a red-skin in the village whom I could send on ahead to this camp to act as your guide, but he was not there and I cared not to hunt any other."

"I would not leave you now, only the Chief Gold Bonnet, who you saw was wounded, gave me some information which I must hasten back to the ranch and report to the doctor."

"Don't mind me, pard, for you have already been most kind, and you know I am used to being alone in the country."

"I can find my way all right, and I hope to get through without a brush with the red-skins, but they must not crowd me too hard."

"If you do meet them let me tell you how to show them that you are a friend, or at least profess to be."

"Just turn your back to them and raise your hands above your head."

"It is the signal of the doctor and his men, and if you cannot talk their lingo they will understand it and pass you as surely as though you had met a band of masons and given them the grip."

"I shall remember it, pard."

"And there is one more thing I wish to tell you of."

"Yes."

"You may not see it, but yet it will be well to warn you."

"What is it?"

"Of course you do not believe in ghosts?"

"Wild Bill laughed."

"Nor spooks and such?"

"Not I."

"Well, the Indians bring in strange stories of a specter being seen on the trail you follow northward from here."

"A specter?"

"Yes, and they avoid the country as though it was the Land of the Evil Spirit."

"What is it?"

"They say it is the spirit of a pale-face woman, mounted on a white horse, and that she appears before them in their camp and on the trail, and moves her hands as though to warn them off."

"And they obey?"

"You bet they obey her, for they shun that part of the country religiously, as I said."

"I don't wonder."

"Now you may, or may not see her, for I have never yet done so, though I have gone the trail several times, but the chief told me that the doctor had seen her and trailed her too though he never spoke to us about it."

"Well, if I see the specter I will trail her, pard, and some day, when we meet again, tell you all about her," said Wild Bill with a smile.

"Of course I do not believe in such things but it is certain that the Comanches have seen something to alarm them, but who, or what it is playing ghost nobody knows."

After a smoke and long chat when dinner was over, Wild Bill said that he had better be going on his way, and the horses being saddled the two men parted with a warm grasp of the hand, for the scout had now come to feel that whatever the Texan might be to him he certainly had been a friend in need.

With his pack horse in lead, Wild Bill rode away from the little camp, the ranchman doing the same, and when he turned to look back, after having gone half a mile, he saw that Rio Grande Ralph had done the same and was waving his sombrero to him.

The scout returned the parting salute and once more continued on his way, the trail now being a well defined one that he was to follow.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE SPECTER APPEARS.

WILD BILL went on his way with the same conscious power in himself to get out of any difficulty that might arise that he had felt in the ranchman to protect him.

He was very cautious, and kept a bright look-out ahead and about him, for he was not so sure but that he would run upon some Indian prowlers.

The Texan had hinted that he had brought him that way, as he had to go back, feeling sure that there would be fewer Indians roving about near the country of the specter than by another and more direct trail.

But Wild Bill had not gone many miles before he came to a halt.

Before him, and coming toward him, he saw a band of red-skins.

They were nearly fifty in number and were riding rapidly, though their ponies seemed laden with game.

The scout at first thought he would try and avoid them, but he had just crossed a small stream, and the trail was too fresh for them not to notice it, so he concluded to take his chances, though they had a very desperate look to him.

Riding into view out of the timber, he saw them halt and reconnoiter.

He then made a display of his gay *serape* and turning his back to the red-skins, raised his hands above his head.

He heard an exclamation of some kind from them, and glancing over his shoulder, saw that they were coming rapidly toward him.

Were they coming as foes or friends, was the question.

In a little while they were close upon him, and for his life he could not have resisted the inclination to turn and face them.

When he did so, and he turned ready to fight to the death if need be, he was relieved to see that they made no hostile demonstration.

His knowledge of Comanche was extremely limited, but he made signs of friendship, pointed to his *serape*, mentioned the name of the Lone Medicine Chief in their tongue and shook hands all around with the whole outfit.

Then, in his curiosity he signed that he wished to make them a present, and he had just cigars enough to go around.

One red skin motioned that he would like something to drink, and Wild Bill handed him over his canteen; but when the Indian discovered that it was water only, the face he made caused the scout to laugh, and he signed as well as he could that he belonged to the Prohibition Party just at that time.

All looked disappointed at this, and then began to beg him for presents, pointing to his well-filled pack-saddle.

But he shook his head, and then they wished to trade one of their five-dollar ponies for his fine horses.

But he again shook his head and pointed ahead and every Indian quickly looked in that direction, as though they expected to see the specter of the trail.

Another desired bargain for his weapons was refused, and as he moved on his way they looked as mad as hornets, and talked earnestly together.

But the chief pointed to the *serape*, Wild Bill thought, and they went on their way at the same rapid gallop they had been going when he saw them.

Well, if that wasn't a young hades to pass through I don't know anything, said Wild Bill with a sigh, and he added:

"The *serape* fetched them though; but I wish every one of those cigars was a cartridge to blow them to the happy hunting grounds."

"Why they would have traded me out of everything I had, if I had yielded."

"I was terribly afraid they would smell that flask of brandy that Major Canfield gave me, and said was good for a snake bite."

"Well, I am through that ordeal, so now what is the next?"

"I'd a heap rather meet the specter than another half hundred of those reds, and the way they were anxious to get along, I guess they were afraid of the specter too and did not wish night to catch them near her country."

"It will be bright moonlight to-night, just the kind of a night when ghosts are supposed to ramble, so I hope I'll get a look at her," and Wild Bill rode on his way once more, anxious to reach the river and cross before night.

This he did, and going into the fringe of timber along the banks, he staked his horses

out, while he went on foot to try and get a shot at several deer he saw feeding out upon the prairie.

He went along down the stream, under cover of the bank for half a mile, and then tried to creep up on the deer.

The sun had set, and the full moon was rising over the prairie, so that he had the deer in a good light, could he get near enough to fire on them.

But hurrying along, they led him some distance off on the prairie, and then bounded suddenly away in rapid flight.

Rising from his crouching attitude to notice the cause of the deer's flight, Wild Bill was startled to hear the thud of rapidly-falling hoofs and to suddenly behold dash between him and the moonlight what appeared to be a specter horse and rider, the latter's arm raised as though in warning.

CHAPTER XLVI.

TRACKING THE SPECTER.

In spite of his nerve, Wild Bill was really startled at the sight that he beheld.

The deer bounding away had given him warning that more than his presence had frightened them, and when he looked for the cause, it had so suddenly appeared over a rise of the prairie, that he was completely taken aback for a moment, and even forgot to draw a revolver or unslung his rifle.

What he beheld was enough to startle any man, and would have put to flight one with less pluck than Wild Bill.

He saw a snow-white horse, apparently without bridle or saddle, his head bent, neck arched, and mane and tail flowing in the wind.

The horse was dashing along at full speed and had suddenly appeared over a rise in the prairie, seeming to come like an apparition from the very ground.

But the animal had a rider.

Upon his back, seated as though in a side-saddle, was what appeared to be a woman.

Her white face was revealed by the moonlight, as was also one bare arm that was raised, the palm turned toward him as though warning him back from the trail he was following.

He saw that she was clad in a robe as white as milk, a turban with long ends about her head, and as she dashed silently on the garments fluttered in the breeze.

She uttered no word, simply passed on in silence, with that warning gesture which seemed to speak volumes.

"Well! that is the specter of the trail is it?" said Wild Bill as she sped on out of sight.

"I could have dropped her horse with a bullet, but then I might have hurt the rider, and being a woman I would not wish to do that.

"But she looks the ghost from hoof to top-knot.

"And what does it mean that a white woman is in this country, and playing ghost too?

"If she is an Injun she's got her face and arm daubed with white, that is certain.

"No, she's white, I am sure.

"But she seemed to have a light about her, yes, and the horse too, as though she had struck a bed of phosphorus.

"I'll look up the trail of that horse-to-morrow, for he had hoofs, not wings, and just see where it leads to.

"But I don't blame the red-skins for being scared at her, or it, or whatever it may be, for it took me all aback at first and no mistake.

"If it had been an Injun it could have killed me, for I forgot I had a gun or revolver until it had flitted away.

"I lost my deer—by Jove no! there they are," and suddenly there came dashing by the scout half a dozen deer at easy range.

Quick as a flash he fired and down fell one of the deer.

Going to it he ran his knife across the throat, threw the deer over his shoulders and started back to camp.

He found all as he had left it.

The specter of the trail had certainly not been there.

Building a fire back under the shelter of the bank he cut off what meat he wished, and soon had his supper ready.

Then he replenished his fire, and not forgetting the advice of Rio Grande Ralph, hung his gay serape up where the light would fall upon it, shaking down his blankets a little distance off in the shadow.

He then brought his horses closer in to the timber and turned in for the night, for no sound broke the silence save the howling of a wolf out on the prairie as he scented the fresh deer-meat and saw the glimmer of the firelight.

Without being disturbed, other than by wolves hunting a feast, Wild Bill passed the night, and by sunrise had eaten his breakfast, saddled up and was ready for the trail.

But he rode out upon the prairie to where he had seen the specter form off the horse and rider the night before, and began to look carefully around for a trail.

He was not long in finding one, and muttered:

"That specter horse leaves his tracks behind him.

"Yes, and he goes in the very direction my trail lies; but wherever it goes I follow, for I would like the experience of running down a ghost."

He followed the trail slowly, for he wished to make no mistake, and was glad to find that it went after a mile or more over toward the timber that bordered the river.

As he went on he discovered that the nature of the country was changing, the prairie land was ending and the hills loomed up ahead.

But on he continued until he entered the hills, still following the fresh trail of the specter horse that had sped by him the night before.

"Now I am nearing the end," he muttered, as he reached the hills just at noon.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SOLVING A MYSTERY.

When Wild Bill reached the timbered hill lands, he went along more cautiously, for he had come upon a place where several trails turned into one.

The trail he followed continued along the main one, and the pace at which the white horse had been going along, a swinging gallop, had slackened down, the tracks showed, to a walk.

Anxious to see what there was at the trail's end, Wild Bill determined not to halt there for a nooning, but to continue on his way.

The country became wilder, the hills higher and here and there were large canyons penetrating the ranges.

There were streams to cross, and more and more the landscape took on a mountainous look.

Suddenly the scout drew rein, for he had come to the entrance to a canyon into which all the trails led, from every direction it seemed.

Here he dismounted, hitched his horses and went forward on foot.

The canyon opened into a small fertile valley as he went along, and he came in sight of a frame structure on the banks of a small stream and sheltered by heavy timber.

But the scout did not hesitate at sight of it, only pressed on, prepared for what he might discover.

He was most cautious, however, going from tree to tree, and at last came to where a rustic bridge, a tree felled across it, spanned the stream.

Crossing the bridge he approached the store, only a few yards distant, and was within fifty feet of the door when a form stepped out of it.

It was the form of a man, tall, wearing long hair and full whiskers, and dressed in buckskin.

He had a belt of arms about his waist, but at sight of Wild Bill gave a yell of mingled fury and fright, while he made a bound for the shelter of a tree.

"Hold on, Black Jack, I know you and have you covered," cried Wild Bill.

The man turned quickly, faced the scout and shouted back:

"Yes, and I know you too, Wild Bill, and the gang at your back."

But Wild Bill did not turn to be caught by the trick, but said:

"Well, shall it be war, Black Jack, for you remember your threat, and I owe you a bullet or two?"

Wild Bill spoke calmly, revolver held in hand, and the man he faced had also drawn his weapon and his sharp eyes were upon the scout.

But in answer to the question put to him he seemed to wish to gain time, for he said:

"I know I wounded you, Wild Bill, but I was escaping for my life then."

"Yes, you robbed your fellow miners, stole the young daughter of Hugh Turpin from him, and got away."

"But I have found your nest, Black Jack, so we have got to come to terms or fight it out right here."

"What do you mean by terms?"

"Where is the money you robbed your comrades of?"

"I lost it."

"I believe that you lie; but, what are you doing here?"

"I was driven out of the New Mexico mines, so came here to hide, for I knew my life was safe nowhere else."

"Where is pretty Sue Turpin?"

"See here, Wild Bill, I'll tell you something you do not know."

"Well?"

"Hugh Turpin was my brother, and he ran off with the girl I loved, and that made me hate him."

"Years after I met him in the mines, but he did not know me, and I found that his wife was dead, that he had lost his money, and had come there to hunt gold."

"His wife died soon after he reached the mines, and their child, Sue, was so much like her mother I determined to steal her from him in revenge, and I did."

"And took good care to rob every miner you could before you left."

"Luck had gone hard with me, so I had to have money."

"Then Sue is your niece?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She died from exposure on the trail here."

"Black Jack!"

"Yes."

"You are as great a liar as I ever listened to, and that is saying a great deal."

Quick as a flash the revolver of the desperado rose, and his finger was on the trigger, when, an instant before he could pull it, Wild Bill's weapon flashed.

Black Jack's weapon went off also, but it was when he was falling, for the bullet of Wild Bill had pierced his brain.

Hardly had the echoes of the weapons died away when there was heard the rapid fall of hoofs and up the canyon came dashing at full speed a horse and rider.

It was the specter of the trail, that Wild Bill had seen the night before, and when he discovered that fact he lowered the ride he had raised, as though he expected to have to meet another foe.

Riding rapidly up to the cabin she drew rein, glanced at the dead body of Black Jack, then at Wild Bill and then asked in an impressive tone:

"Who are you?"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE DESPERADO'S CAPTIVE.

WILD BILL looked at the rider of the white horse with mingled admiration and surprise.

She was a young girl, scarcely over sixteen, with large dark blue eyes, golden hair and a face of rare beauty, though it was now smeared over with a white powder.

She wore the same flowing costume she had the night before, and seemed perfectly at home in the little saddle that was strapped upon the splendid white animal, though bridle she had none.

She gazed at the scout with a look that was hard to fathom, while he, in answer to her question answered:

"You are Sue Turpin, once known as the Mascot of Moonlight Mine."

"Ah! you know me?" she said excitedly, and then added:

"Yes, and I have met you before, let me tell you when and where—oh, yes, I recall you now, for you came to my father's cabin once, and you are—Wild Bill."

"You are right, Sue, and you have a good memory, for that was three years ago."

"And have you seen my father?" she eagerly cried.

"Yes, some months ago, and he has struck it rich, and will soon leave the mines."

"He sought in vain to find you, and gave you up for dead, and then as a recompense for your loss he struck a new lead that panned out splendidly."

"My poor, poor father!"

"How he must have suffered on my account; but then you have avenged him and me," and she pointed to the dead body of Black Jack, which she had hardly seemed to notice before.

"I followed your trail here, for you passed me last night on the prairie, and Black Jack sought to kill me, and I was too quick for him."

"Thank Heaven! for now my life begins anew, for oh! what have I not suffered at his hands."

"He was my father's brother, and stole me to avenge himself on my father, because my mother would not marry him."

"He stole, oh, so much money, and then fled with me, and Satan seemed to aid him, for he eluded all pursuit, but at last was forced to leave civilization and came here."

"He had been here before and believed that he would find gold in large quantities, while he promised me he would take me back to my father if I would aid him."

"I did so, and we came here, built this cabin, and here he has lived, slaving himself day after day in search of gold."

"Twice each year he would go away for a couple of weeks, leaving me alone, and taking both horses with him, for he went after provisions to some settlement, I suppose."

"I could not escape, on foot and without food or weapons, but I was hoping, hoping all the time my captivity would end."

"Afraid of the Indians he urged me to play specter, and I did so, for by so doing I could learn the trails, and each time I went away I extended my rides further, intending some day to make a break for life if I died on the trail."

"So it was you I passed last night?"

"Yes."

"I had seen some Indians a short while before, and only caught a glimpse of you, so supposed you were one."

"If I had only known who you were?"

"It is just as well as it is, for now you can return with me to your father, for my trail back leads me not many miles from his mine."

"Oh how glad I will be, and will poor papa not be happy too?"

"Indeed he will; but did Black Jack find any gold here?"

"Not a dollar's worth; but he has all that he robbed my father and others of when he ran off, and I have seen him count it over night after night, and it is just seven thousand dollars."

"I know its hiding-place too; but you will bury him, will you not, Wild Bill?"

"Oh yes, he is human, bad as he is."

"I will first go after my horses, for I do not wish to lose them."

"No fear, for no Indian will come near here, and I have never seen a white man since we came here, except the hateful face of my uncle—no, no, I must not speak ill of him now, for he is dead," and she shuddered as she glanced at the dead form of the desperado.

Then springing from her horse, she turned the animal loose and said:

"Now, while you go after your horses, I will get dinner, for I have been hunting and am hungry."

"See, I have some game and fish too," and she held up a string of birds and another of fish, for she had thrown them upon the ground when she rode up.

"What did you kill those birds with?"

"My revolver," and she took a revolver out from under her robe.

"You are a good shot."

"I never miss," was the confident reply.

"My uncle would not trust me with a revolver at first, fearing I would kill him, and I used a bow and arrows to kill game; but at last he let me take fire-arms, and I practiced all I could, for I had it in heart to make my escape some day, even if I had to take his life, and I knew I would have to be a good shot."

"It is strange that he did not kill you, Wild Bill, for he was quick as a flash and a dead shot."

"I am something of a shot myself, and a trifle quick," modestly replied Wild Bill, and he was going to fetch his horse when the girl said:

"Please take that out of sight."

It was the body she referred to, and Wild Bill bore it to a spot beyond the rustic bridge.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A COMRADE ON THE TRAIL.

WILD BILL found his horses all right, and taking them up to the cabin, put them up the canyon where the two animals of the desperado were kept, the splendid white that played "specter steed," and a fine roan.

Sue Turpin had been busy getting dinner, and it not having been long since Black Jack returned with a fresh supply of provisions, whenever he went for them, she set before Wild Bill a very tempting repast for a frontier meal.

During the dinner she explained to Wild Bill just what she had lately discovered the plot of the desperado to be.

"He kept himself posted, I am sure, of my father's movements, and knew that he was making money rapidly, and I do believe that he intended to take his life, and then, shaving his beard off, cutting his hair and playing the gentleman, go there and claim his fortune, for there is no other heir than myself."

"Yes, Wild Bill, you came just in time, for had you not have done so, I would have acted, cruel as it would have seemed for me to take my uncle's life."

"Then I would have packed up, taken the horses, and started on the trail he was wont to go, leaving it to the instinct of the animals to carry me on to the settlement to which he went for supplies."

"You are a brave girl, Sue, and would no doubt have gotten through in safety, while, in self-defense it would have been perfectly justifiable for you to take the life of the man who was persecuting you and intended to kill your father."

"Well, I have heard him talking to himself, for it was a habit he could never break himself of, and I distinctly heard him utter the words:

"He'd struck it rich, they told me, and when he has got more it will be my time to strike, for I can get it all, once I put her out of the way, for I will be the heir."

"Those words burned into my brain, Wild Bill, until at last I had made up my mind to act, and in a short while more I would have done so; but thank Heaven you have come."

"So say I, little girl; but now I will go out and bury the body and then we can pack up for a start to-morrow, for I am anxious to get on, and there is no need of longer delay."

"I will go with you to help you bury him, for, don't think me cruel for saying so, I will only feel happy when I see the grave heaped up over him," and a bitter look swept over the face of the young girl as she walked down the canyon with Wild Bill, he carrying the desperado's pick and shovel.

A spot was soon selected for the grave, which the scout dug quickly, and the body, wrapped in a blanket, was placed within it.

Then the grave was filled in and gazing down

upon it Sue Turpin said in a low, impressive voice:

"Now I am content, for the grave is between me and that man."

"God forgive him, for I never can."

She turned abruptly away, and returning to the cabin at once set about preparing for her long journey.

The supplies were all put in the pack-saddle, which Black Jack had brought with him, and all else that the girl wished to carry along with her.

The weapons of the dead man she took possession of for her own use, and when she had thrown aside her white robe Wild Bill saw that she was dressed in a suit of buckskin, fringed leggings, short skirt and moccasins, all elaborately embroidered, while she had a slouch hat for her head.

"We'll take the ghost robe along, Wild Bill, for it maybe that I will have to put it on."

"What for, Sue?"

"To scare the Indians."

"I would rather depend upon this," and Wild Bill patted his rifle.

"Don't you believe it, for when they once see me you will never get near enough to them to use your rifle."

"I tell you it is a great scare for them, and the only fun I have ever had here is in making them run."

"You see, I was afraid of them, too, and so was glad to play specter, and, oh! how they did get up and, as the miners used to say, hump themselves, when I appeared, day or night."

"Well, you did look like a specter I admit, Sue, and I guess it would be well to take the robe along."

"I hope we will see some red-skins, so you can watch them light out."

"Why, when they would come this way hunting I would show myself and they would leave their game."

"I had heard of you before I saw you as a specter, Sue, for your fame had extended to a ranch I stopped at on my way here."

"I must tell you of my trail on some time as we ride along, and I will be glad to have a comrade on the trail I assure you, especially one who can play ghost and scare Indians."

As though he had no dread or thought on the subject, Wild Bill turned in that night into the bunk where the desperado had slept, while Sue, in her blunt way called out from the little room at one end of the cabin which she occupied:

"If you don't see uncle's ghost to-night, Wild Bill, sleeping there, I shall be greatly mistaken."

"Ghosts don't trouble me, Sue, even specters on horseback," was the reply, and the scout seemed not in the least troubled at his quarters.

Early the next morning he was up, breakfast was soon gotten rid of, and the horses were led up to the door.

The two pack-animals were first saddled, and then the scout's horse and the specter steed, upon which Wild Bill had insisted putting a bridle.

"All right; but it comes off quick if I see Injuns, Wild Bill, for ghostly steeds don't wear bridles, and you see my saddle can hardly be noticed," and she leaped to the saddle without any apparent effort.

Wild Bill then closed the cabin door, and mounting his horse rode away down the canyon, followed by the young girl.

Reaching the valley below he branched off in a direction that would carry him back to the stream he had left to track the specter steed, and when the noon camp was reached they had left the cabin of Black Jack many miles behind them.

CHAPTER L.

THE KING OF MOONLIGHT MINE.

In a large mining-camp of Colorado was the home of Hugh Turpin, the miner whose daughter had been so ruthlessly stolen from him by his own brother, and whose life had been since an almost wreck.

A tall, fine looking man of forty-five, he had become the idol of his comrades, for he had dared, years before, to bring into their midst his beautiful wife and pretty young daughter.

The wife had quickly faded and died, and the blow had been a cruel one to the husband; but he had laid her away in a pretty canyon, covered her grave with wild flowers, and devoted his life to getting gold and the care of his daughter, who became known as the "Mascot of the Mines."

Hugh Turpin was ever generous, his hand was always extended to do good, and he was the most popular man in the mines, so that when Black Jack, a miner, had robbed his comrades and kidnapped Sue, the whole force of the mining-camps had turned out in search of the man and his captive, though in vain.

It was a year before Hugh Turpin gave that search up, and then he returned to the mines a sad-faced man.

He soon after struck it rich, in a mine, and when he gambled he always won.

He was made the "Judge" of the "Court," was captain of the Vigilantes, and was soon

given the name of the "King of Moonlight Mine."

All honest miners loved him, all evil ones feared him.

Yet Hugh Turpin was a broken-hearted man, and seemed ever living in the past.

One evening he sat alone in his cabin, which was the best in the mining-camps, and he was gazing idly into the fire, dreaming of the past.

A knock at his door was repeated before it aroused him, and then he called out:

"Come in, pard."

The door opened and Hugh Turpin sprung to his feet, while with outstretched hand he called out:

"Wild Bill, old pard, it is you is it?"

"I am more than glad to see you, for I have not forgotten that you aided me in the chase after Black Jack, and, had he not killed your horse and wounded you, you would have captured him."

"But, alas! I have never heard from him since, and she is dead."

"Don't you believe it, pard, for sit down and let me tell you some good news."

"Good news for me, Wild Bill?"

"Yes, even for you, pard."

"What is it, for when I dig a fortune out of my mine I care little about it."

"Well, I know where Black Jack is."

"You do?" shouted the man, almost in a frenzy, while he added:

"Tell me, where is he, for I will have his life."

"Where is he, I say?"

"In his grave."

"It is not so, for he could not die by other hand than mine."

"Be calm, Turpin, for I tell you he is in his grave, for I put him there."

"You buried him?"

"Yes, and killed him."

"Then you avenged me."

"Turpin, do you know who he was?"

"A desperado of the worst type, one I befriended, and who then paid me for my kindness to him."

"You had a brother John, had you not?"

"Yes, poor fellow, he was younger than I, and loved my wife."

"When she married me he ran off to sea, and I never heard of him again; but he hated me, and would never let me love him as a brother."

"Remember, if you can, if you recall in Black Jack any resemblance to your brother?"

"By Heaven, yes!"

"Now I know that he was none other than Jack Turpin, a beardless boy when last I saw him."

"Yes, he it was who struck me this cruel blow."

"It is not so cruel now, for your daughter is not dead, Turpin."

"Do you mean this?" and the miner looked squarely into the eyes of Wild Bill.

"Yes, he stole her and carried her away with him to a lone cabin in the Indian country."

"He knew you, and sought revenge."

"Then he heard of your fortune, and decided some day to kill you and get it."

"He had your daughter playing ghost to scare off the Indians, and I saw her and tracked her to his cabin."

"I knew him, he recognized me, and I killed him, while his finger was drawing trigger to shoot me down."

"Hugh Turpin, your daughter was my comrade on the trail here, and she is no longer a little girl, but verging upon womanhood, and—But come in, Sue."

The door flew back and in rushed Sue Turpin, while Wild Bill hastily left the cabin.

In an hour he returned to find the father and daughter talking together and plotting for the future, and the greeting he got caused him to blush like a girl.

"We have settled it all, Wild Bill, for we shall leave the mines and go East, where Sue will attend school for a couple of years, and then we can enjoy my large fortune together, while you must—"

"No, not make no plans for me, Turpin, for I remain at my post of duty on the frontier, but some day may come East and visit you."

The next morning Wild Bill was off again on the trail northward, while the camp of Moonlight Mine went wild with joy over the return of its mascot.

CHAPTER LI.

A VISITOR.

AFTER Wild Bill had left Fort D— Colonel Monastery began the duties which had carried him to the Texan forts, namely, on a tour of inspection.

His daughter had been invited by an old friend at the fort to visit her, and she had been made to at once feel at home there, while Mrs. Silvester, whose husband, after his staff duty ended with Colonel Monastery, was ordered to resume command of his company again, and it was stationed at D—.

So Mrs. Silvester had gone to work getting her home in order, and insisted that Marcelite

should remain as her guest until her father was ordered to the command of some fort on the frontier, for he had asked for such duty.

The arrival of such a lovely woman as was Mrs. Silvester, young, beautiful and winning, was considered a great boon at Fort D—, and all the young officers were rejoiced when they beheld the daughter of Colonel Monastery.

Marcelite was known to be rich, in addition to her beauty of face and form, and as she was reported heart-free a number of the young gallants with shoulder-straps decided to go in and win the moment they caught a glimpse of her after her arrival.

The story of Marcelite's accomplishments as a shot, las-o-thrower and horsewoman were quickly known, and it was told how she had shown the greatest nerve on the long and dangerous trail to the fort.

The result was that she at once became a belle, and the home of her friend, the daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Allyn, at once was besieged with visitors, for Eva Allyn was very popular herself, though she had not the added charm of being an heiress.

The duties of Colonel Monastery taking him to the different posts, Marcelite was thrown wholly upon her friends for chaperonage, but she found them most ready to care for her, especially Mrs. Silvester, who called her her adopted daughter.

As the days passed by Marcelite felt anxious to hear of the mission of Wild Bill, though she knew that it was impossible for her to get news for a long time to come yet; but still she was most desirous of hearing of the result of his visit to the mysterious Texan's home.

Just a week after the departure of Wild Bill, a horseman came to Fort D—, arriving after nightfall one evening, and asking for Colonel Monastery.

He was told that Colonel Monastery had left the fort two days before on a tour of inspection.

He then requested to see Captain Silvester, but learned that the captain had accompanied the colonel.

His next request was to see "Captain" Canfield.

"Major Canfield, you mean, sir?"

"I knew him as captain some months ago."

"He is major now, sir."

"I am glad to hear of his promotion; he deserves it."

"Please say to Major Canfield that there is one here to see him."

"What name, sir?"

"Never mind the name."

"He may be busy, sir, or at a sociable, so if you give your name, he will know who it is," said the sergeant of the guard.

"Say that it is a friend of the Texan ranchero."

The sergeant sent a soldier with the message, and ten minutes after Major Canfield came in person.

"Why, Valdos, is it you indeed, for I surmised as much from your message."

"Come at once to my quarters, for I am heartily glad to see you."

"I am here, Major Canfield, to bring you some information of importance."

"Ah! some good errand you are on, I'll warrant; but you are to be my guest, so come along to my quarters."

"Here, sergeant, send this horse to my stables," and Adrian Valdos dismounted and walked along with the major, to whom he said:

"You are very kind, major, but I can remain but a short while, for I must depart by midnight."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Valdos, for there is an entertainment to-night at Lieutenant Colonel Allyn's and you must accompany me, for Miss Marcelite Monastery is her guest, and Mrs. Silvester will be there, and you know both ladies, while you will have an opportunity of meeting all our ladies and officers, and mark my words you will be a lion among them, for they know of you."

"You are most kind, major, but I cannot go, for I am not in presentable trim for one thing, and—"

"I'll lend you my civilian's dress-suit."

"But then I am forced to depart early, sir, for much depends upon it, as you will understand when I tell you that I am here to warn your commanding officer of danger."

"Ah! it is as bad as that is it?"

"But here we are, so come in," and the major led the way into his cozy quarters.

Adrian Valdos looked travel-stained and weary, as though he had ridden far, and was anxious as well.

He was dressed in his Mexican garb, and his manners were calm and courtly as ever.

He saw that the major was in full dress and ready to go out when he had received his message, but taking the seat offered to him he said:

"I know that I am detaining you, major, but then you will understand that I have good reasons when you hear what I have to say."

"Do not make excuses," and calling to his "striker," the major ordered some supper brought in at once for his unexpected guest, and said:

"You have news for the general also you say?"

"Yes, sir, I will give you the information to carry to him."

"Nothing of the kind, you go with me," and the major sent a soldier to General Carr requesting that he delay going to the Allyn entertainment until he could see him, as he had a visitor to bring with him and one who had important information.

Then he turned to hear what Adrian Valdos had to say.

CHAPTER LII.

THE WARNING.

ADRIAN VALDOS lost no time in coming to the point, for he said, as he glanced about the pretty sitting-room to see no one else was near:

"I am here, Major Canfield, to tell you that I am just out of the Indian country."

"Ah!"

"I have, since I left Colonel Monastery's command, gone to each one of the villages, and I know that the defeat the red-skins met with, their failure to capture him and his party, and many other things combined, have gotten them into a very ugly and dangerous mood."

"I expected that."

"Doubtless, sir; but have any preparations been made to put a stop to it?"

"Frankly, no."

"But we know we are too strong here for them to attack, and the other forts are fairly well garrisoned."

"Very true, sir; but the settlements are exposed, and the Indians will send out several large bands to threaten them, and drawing the garrisons away from the forts will pounce down upon them and carry them."

"Ah! now it does look dangerous."

"With the soldiers running back to the help of the posts the Indians will retreat through the several settlements and they will fall an easy prey to them."

"The plan is a good one, Major Canfield, the braves are being thoroughly organized, there will be three large columns to act together, and a heavy supporting force to protect their retreat."

"You know this you say, Mr. Valdos?" said the major seriously.

"I do, sir, for I am just from the Indian country, and more, I have been asked to lead one of the columns."

"It is needless to tell you that I declined the honor, but I am supposed to be friendly with the Indians, and so I must get back to my home, while, if I can, I will send you further information."

"And if not?"

"I would advise you to act promptly, sir, for then this move can be checked in its infancy by a show of strength, a threatened march, in fact, into the Indian country."

"Yes, that is just what should be done, and I believe the general will so see it, when he has heard what you have to say."

"But here is your supper, and after you have finished we will run over and see the general."

The servant brought in a very tempting repast for his master's guest, and Adrian Valdos ate it with an appetite that did justice to the spread.

During the meal he asked regarding Colonel Monastery and those who had come with him, saying:

"I happen to know that the colonel was corralled on his march, and rescued by a force from the fort."

"May I ask if any of his party were killed or wounded?"

"Your friend Cole was severely wounded and is still abed, but is improving."

"My promotion made him first lieutenant of the company, and he deserved the rise for his pluck; but he still harps upon you."

"I am glad to furnish him the amusement if he likes it, sir; but I am now at your service," and the two walked together over to General Carr's quarters.

The general, a stern-faced man with true military bearing, received the major pleasantly, and greeted his companion of whom Major Canfield said:

"Mr. Valdos, general, is the gentleman who guided me in my chase after Elmo the Mexican, after helping my command out of a scrape, and enabling me to run down the outlaws, as you know."

"He is now here, sir, with information of importance for you."

"Mr. Valdos, I am most pleased to meet you, sir, and I assure you I appreciate all that you did for the major and his men, and later for Colonel Monastery and his party."

"Your services have been invaluable, and I am happy to tell you that I heartily indorsed a request to the president that he appoint you to a lieutenantancy in the army."

"Be seated, sir, for I am truly glad to know you, and Miss Monastery and Miss Silvester will be pleased to meet you again, when we take you with us to-night."

The kind greeting of the general seemed to touch Adrian Valdos deeply, for he thanked him

and, after declining decidedly the invitation extended to him, he told the story of the humor the Indians were in, and their plans for a general attack.

General Carr looked grave at once, and asked many questions, to all of which the Texan gave frank replies, taking a pencil and sketching a map of the settlements the Indians intended to strike, marking their trails in coming and retreating, and showing the forces they would put into the field.

"What, two thousand, you say?"

"Yes, general."

"Can it be possible they can mount that many warriors?"

"Yes, sir, for they have aid from other tribes, and they can still leave a good force to protect their retreat, sir."

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Certainly, I will be glad to have you do so."

"It is, sir, that you send your soldiers in three columns by the very trails the Indians are to come on, thus forcing them back, while the settlements arming behind your troops will be a reserve, a reinforcement as you may need, general."

"It is just what I will do, Mr. Valdos, and I will send couriers off at dawn to the other forts to give the warning and request troops sent to the points I will need them."

"Canfield, you must not remain long at the sociable to-night, but return with me, and ask Colonel Allyn, and my adjutant to also be here at eleven o'clock."

"Now, Mr. Valdos, will you not be persuaded to go with us?"

"I must still decline, general, and as I have a long ride before me, I will say good-night."

"If in my power to do so, I will send you further information, but do not count on that, please," and bidding General Carr good-by the Texan left headquarters accompanied by Major Canfield, who said:

"Valdos, you made a good impression with the general, and he is one to read a man like a book."

"Your commission is assured."

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SECRET OUT.

WHEN Adrian Valdos returned to the major's quarters his horse was ordered, and the animal having been well groomed and fed came out looking fresh and ready for the long trail before him.

The Texan was about to mount, when Major Canfield said:

"Walk along with me as far as Colonel Allyn's, for I drop in there, and you can then mount and go on your way, though I am really most sorry to lose you, but you know best."

"Yes, my duty calls me elsewhere, major—oh! that is a pretty scene."

They had been walking along together and had just come in view of Colonel Allyn's pretty home, which was all illuminated now, while the fort band was playing lively music in front of it.

Halting in the glare of the illumination, Major Canfield had just grasped the hand of the Texan in farewell, when a silvery voice called out:

"Ah, Major Canfield!"

"Do my eyes deceive me or is not that Mr. Valdos with you?"

"Recognized you are, Valdos."

"It takes a woman to see what she wishes to, and be blind when she does not wish to see."

"Come, you are caught," and in response he called back:

"Your eyes could not deceive you, Miss Monastery, though they have doubtless deceived many a poor fellow in blue and brass—it is Mr. Adrian Valdos."

"I knew it."

"So you intended to give us the slip and escape, sir, for I heard General Carr tell Colonel Allyn that you were in the fort and would depart at once."

"Fortunately I came out for a breath of this balmy air, and surprised you, so now you will come in," and Marcelite held out her hand, which the ranchero grasped, while he bowed low and said:

"Pardon me if I seem rude, Miss Monastery, but I am compelled to depart, as later Major Canfield will tell you."

"My remembrances, please, to your father and Captain and Mrs. Silvester."

"But Major Canfield's influence may cause you to change your mind."

"I have pleaded in vain, Miss Monastery; but, candidly, Mr. Valdos finds it necessary to depart at once."

"I am sorry; but let me return you your ring, Mr. Valdos, sent by the Indian messenger, for see, I am wearing it."

"May I ask Miss Monastery to continue to wear it until next I meet her, for to-night I would prefer not to take it away."

"On one condition."

"Name it, please."

"That the next time you visit the fort you will call and see me, for I wish you to meet the

sweetest girl in the world, my friend, Eva Allyn."

"I agree to the condition, Miss Monastery, to come and see the sweetest girl in the world," was the gallant reply, and with this double meaning to her own words, the Texan bowed, leaped into his saddle and rode away, leaving Marcelite to re-enter the house upon the arm of Major Canfield, who said:

"What is Valdos's loss, Miss Marcelite, is my gain."

"How do you mean, Major Canfield?"

"He lost the pleasure of your society, and I gained it by his being with me."

"Just see how the youngsters look at me with envy," and he went over and paid his respects to the colonel and Mrs. Allyn, and pretty Eva their daughter, who looked terribly disappointed when she heard what Marcelite had to tell her and said:

"Just to think, major, I didn't get to see Marcelite's hero."

"I heard him say that he intended to call upon you though, Miss Eva."

"Call upon me!"

"Yes, he said he would, upon his next visit to the fort, call upon the sweetest girl in the world, and Miss Monastery said that was *you*," and the major cast a glance at Marcelite which she readily understood, for she knew how he had taken the words of the Texan.

"I tell you, Eva, there is something in the wind, for the general, your father, Major Canfield and the post adjutant have gone and it is not yet eleven o'clock."

"The visit of Mr. Valdos to the fort to-night meant something I am sure," said Marcelite an hour after, calling Eva Allyn aside.

"I hope it is nothing serious, Marcelite, though it does look so," assured Eva Allyn.

"Well, I suppose we will know to-morrow; but why cannot these lords of creation take us into their confidence and not let us wait to learn the news when every private in the fort has gotten the information," and Marcelite whirled away in a waltz with a captain of light artillery who just then came up to claim her for the dance.

The result of the council in the general's quarters that night was the starting of half a dozen couriers before dawn with special dispatches to the different posts.

But the day came with no show of excitement about the post and neither Marcelite or Eva could get a word out of Lieutenant Colonel Allyn as to there being any trouble, or why Adrian Valdos had come to the post.

Two nights after, however, at midnight, there marched as silently as possible out of the fort, Lieutenant Colonel Allyn with seven companies of infantry, all mounted for the march, a battery of six light guns, and Major Canfield at the head of five troops of cavalry, a force of nearly seven hundred men all told.

The next morning the secret came out, that there was trouble expected with the Indians and a small army was to invade their country with all dispatch.

At the different rendezvous appointed the commands from the other posts arrived on time, and three separate columns, each of two light guns, four companies of infantry and three troops of cavalry, started for the Indian country by different trails, and numbering sufficient men to strike severe blows upon the hostiles.

Unexpected to be met at their own game the Indian columns were surprised on the march down to strike the settlement and quickly put to flight, the troopers pressing them hard and with the loss of many braves, thus checking a raid that would have been most disastrous but for the warning received from Adrian Valdos.

The victorious soldiers returned to their posts, and the secret leaked out that the "Mysterious Guide," as the Texan was called, had been the one to bring the news of the uprising of the Indians, and Eva Allyn said to her friend:

"Marcelite, your Texan is a hero indeed."

"I really am half in love with him."

"Yes, and Major Canfield says General Carr has sent on word to the President giving him credit for the important information he brought, and his plan to get the best of the Indians."

"I only hope if his commission comes, I can give it to him; but he is still as great a mystery to me as ever," and Marcelite sighed, for she had not yet heard from Wild Bill the result of his mission.

CHAPTER LVIII.

MARCELITE RECEIVES A LETTER.

It was just two months after the departure of Wild Bill, that the mail one day to Fort D—, by a roundabout way, brought to Marcelite Monastery a letter addressed in an unknown hand.

She saw that the post-mark was from a fort in the then Territory of Colorado, and she eagerly opened it, as soon as she had sought her own room, for she was then the guest of Mrs. Silvester, her father having been ordered to the command of a frontier fort in the North, where she expected to join him at a later day.

Throwing herself into an easy-chair, Marcelite began to read the letter, she had so long expected, and wondered why she had not received, for she had heard that Wild Bill had returned to his post in safety some time before.

"But she saw by the post-mark that her letter had been sent, so first of all exonerated the scout for seeming neglect."

The letter was dated at the fort where Wild Bill was chief of scouts and was as follows:

"DEAR LADY:—

"I hasten to comply with my promise to you, for I arrived here only last night, after a long, hard, yet in some respects a most successful trip."

"I was so fortunate as to find, after crossing the river, a wounded red-skin, none other than the one who brought the message from Mr. Valdos, with the ring as a token of good faith."

"He was badly wounded in the foot, his horse had been killed, his comrades had deserted him and he was in a bad way."

"But I doctored him up and he was my guide to the ranch of the doctor, that is Mr. Valdos, for he had been there often it seems."

"I found the ranchero away from home, but was well received by Rio Grande Ralph his chief ranchman and four cowboys."

"They treated me splendidly, gave me the chief's quarters, which are in an old Mexican Mission, and I noticed that he lived well for the frontier, for he had books in plenty, paintings and all to make him comfortable."

"I saw in his quarters a likeness of the chief in the uniform of a captain of Lancers in the Mexican Army, and in the same frame with it was a young and beautiful girl."

"The ranchmen spoke of their chief with affection, but gave no reason for his dwelling there as he did."

"They drive cattle and horses, for he has a large ranch, twice a year to points where they are met by men who buy them, and at such times get their supplies."

"Neither Indians or Mexican outlaws ever disturb the chief or his ranch, and that was about all that I could find out regarding him, though I am convinced that he is as true as steel."

"Leaving the wounded red-skin at the ranch, I went on under the guidance of Rio Grande Ralph, and he added to the mystery of the outfit by taking me right through the Indian country, stopping one night in the village of Gold Bonnet a chief your father knows by name."

"My hair was not raised, as I expected it would be, and he guided me on beyond and left me, warning me to look out for a specter on horseback."

"I saw the specter, and she nearly raised my hair by fright; but I took her trail and followed her to her den, and it was well I did."

Then Wild Bill went on to tell the story of finding Black Jack Turpin, the story he had heard from him and that he had been forced to kill him when the "specter" appeared upon the scene, and who she proved to be.

The story of the trail on to the mines, with his fair comrade followed with an account of the happy reunion of father and daughter, after which he continued on to the fort.

"I hold myself in readiness always to obey your orders, miss, so command me at your will."

"Now I will close," he continued, "this, the longest letter I ever wrote, or expect to write again, and which I hope has not bored you; but in conclusion let me say that those who believe Adrian Valdos a false man do not know what a true man is, no matter what appearances there may be against him in the life he leads and his mysterious friendship with outlaws and hostile Indians."

"Now, Miss Monastery, with every good wish for your happiness, let me subscribe myself."

"Your friend,

"J. B. HICKOK,

"Wild Bill."

This letter Marcelite read over several times, and then went with it to her friend Eloise Silvester who also carefully went over it, after which it was shown to Major Canfield, to whom the confession was made that she had asked Wild Bill to go to the ranch to find out all he could about Adrian Valdos, for she had not wished her father to recommend one for a commission who was really unworthy of the honor.

"I am glad to have read this letter, Miss Monastery, for it shows the scout's opinion, and Wild Bill's opinion means a great deal."

"But let me tell you that the commission has already arrived for Mr. Valdos, a first lieutenant of cavalry in my regiment, and I am, with three troops, ordered North for duty within a few weeks, so we must notify Valdos of his good fortune as early as possible."

CHAPTER LV.

MARCELITE PLAYS TO WIN.

"CAPTAIN SILVESTER, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Out with it, Miss Marcelite, for of course it is granted."

It was in the pretty fort home of Captain Silvester at Fort D—, and the morning after the

news had come that the President had appointed Adrian Valdos a lieutenant of cavalry in the army.

"You know that Mr. Valdos has been appointed?"

"Yes, and heartily glad am I of it."

"You are also aware that I am going to my father at his post in the North?"

"That is what worries me, for I shall be most sorry to give you up."

"Especially as I steal your wife away for a couple of months or more, and it was good of you to say she could accompany me."

"I will be glad to feel that she is with you, for you know my duties will keep me away from the fort here for several months; but to that favor."

"Major Canfield is ordered to the fort that my father is in command of."

"He informed me so this morning, and he appears glad to go, though of course a pair of bright eyes has nothing to do with it," and the captain glanced slyly at Marcelite, for the major had been most attentive to her.

Unheeding the remark, she continued:

"He has orders to send his troops by different trails, and one must go near the ranch of Mr. Valdos."

"I see."

"Now you, your wife, and many more of us owe our lives to Mr. Valdos, and, as my father was the originator of getting his commission—"

"Prompted by his daughter."

"We are not discussing Marcelite Monastery, but Adrian Valdos."

"All right. I am all attention."

"I say, as my father aided in the commission, I would esteem it a favor if I could carry it to him."

"Whew?"

"As a slight token of my appreciation."

Another whistle.

"I would be under the chaperonage of your loving wife, and protected by a troop of cavalry."

"Say under Lieutenant Cole, Captain Lane being absent just now."

"Not for gold or precious stones," laughed Marcelite.

"Oh no, I do not care to give Mr. Valdos his lieutenantancy, and have Lieutenant Cole tell him that, having been appointed from civil life, he will not stand as high as the graduates of West Point."

"Oh, no; Lieutenant Cameron Cole stands high as a young officer of courage and ability, but his prejudices are deep as the sea, and he seems to always have a chip on his shoulder against Mr. Valdos."

"Perhaps it is for the interest taken in Valdos by a certain young lady."

"Nonsense! for he was rude before I ever saw Valdos, when he was saved by the ranchero when he rescued Major Canfield's command."

"It is a pure prejudice, and having taken it on he cannot shake it off."

"Outside that I regard Lieutenant Cole most highly."

"But now to my interest in Valdos," and Marcelite spoke warmly. "What fate would have been mine, what fate would have been your beautiful wife's, but for that man, and do you wonder that we both feel toward him the warmest regard?"

"No, indeed, I do not wonder, especially as I have the same regard for him."

"Now to the favor?"

"Well, I wish to have the troop that is to be our escort take the trail by the ranch of Mr. Valdos, that I may present him the commission, and I wish you to use your influence with the general and Major Canfield to have it so."

"My dear young lady, your influence is paramount to mine a thousand fold, so you make the request, and I, as your acting guardian—you being my guest—will give full consent and make the request also."

"You can make two marches of it to the ranch, and that way will really be the safest way for you to go, while, as Canfield must go with one troop, I suppose he will select the one that escorts Miss Marcelite Monastery."

"That will be splendid, only—"

"Only what?"

"Well, he is ever courteous as well as military, and he will consider it etiquette to go with his old troop."

"Certainly."

"And—"

"And Lieutenant Cole belongs to that troop, in fact will command it upon the march, as Lieutenant Lane is on leave and will join it in the North."

"I see, and after all Cole will go along, but then you know Canfield will be with you, too, and his presence will effectually bottle up Cole."

"All right; I have no other interest in the matter than to present Mr. Valdos his commission, and to keep Lieutenant Cole from giving him instructions as to his future life."

"But then it is settled that we go by that trail?"

"Always provided the general and Major Canfield agree."

"Certainly, I will see them."

"Come, Eloise, go with me to see the general, and then we will send for the major and open fire on him."

"The general and the major both have a splendid name for bravery, but I'll warrant my commission they both yield under the first fire," laughed Captain Silvester.

"Well, we will open the siege before the general has time to send a courier off with the commission."

"Come, Eloise," and Marcelite turned to Mrs. Silvester, who had been a silent but interested listener to the conversation between her husband and the young girl.

CHAPTER LVI.

ON THE MARCH.

MARCELITE and Mrs. Silvester made a very dangerous pair to beard any lion in his den, especially one like General Carr, who always admired the ladies.

He received them with courteous grace, bade them be seated, and then asked what service he could render, for the general was far-seeing, and knew that it was a visit for a purpose.

Marcelite plainly stated her case, and then Mrs. Silvester added her strong point, and the general said:

"There are three troops to start by different trails for a post in the North, and Major Canfield is ordered there in command."

"He cannot make a trinity of himself, so must accompany one of the commands, and why not the one which will afford him charming company en route?"

"I have a letter from Colonel Monastery, asking me to kindly arrange so that his daughter and Mrs. Silvester can have the escort of one of the troops going north, and the one that takes the trail by the ranch of the newly-appointed lieutenant, will be my selection as a guard for them."

"I was about to send a courier with the commission to Mr. Valdos, and request him to report to me for orders, but of course I will be pleased to have Miss Monastery honor him by taking him the important papers."

"Now what does Major Canfield say to this plan?"

"We came first to you, general, of course, but will see Major Canfield later," answered Marcelite.

"Then tell him I am satisfied with any arrangement he may make, and I suppose he will wish to take his old troop with him?"

"I suppose so, general."

"That means Cole will be along, so mind you, Miss Marcelite, you must play your cards well to keep my officers from having a duel on the trail, for you know it is said that a woman is at the bottom of all trouble in this world."

"That is a slander of our sex, sir; but I thank you, general, for it will really give me much pleasure to carry the commission to Mr. Valdos," and the two ladies took their departure.

That afternoon Major Canfield reported at Captain Silvester's home, as he said:

"Under orders from the colonel's daughter."

"You wish me to take this commission to Valdos, you say, Miss Marcelite?"

"Why of course I will, for I expected to start ahead of my troop and have a few days' hunting with him, awaiting there for the command."

"You and Mrs. Silvester, I believe, go by another trail, with Lieutenant Cole in charge, for that is your arrangement is it not?"

The major looked innocent, but Marcelite replied:

"Major Canfield you are a fraud, and ever will be."

"You know that is not the way I arranged it."

"Indeed, then I have been misinformed," was the innocent reply.

"No, I asked to take that commission myself, with Mrs. Silvester as my guardian, and you as a big brother to see that we got into no trouble, while Lieutenant Cole goes with his troop as your escort."

The major laughed and responded:

"Have it your own way, Miss Marcelite, especially as your father has written me hoping I will come with you to keep you out of mischief, which I will do."

"Now when do you wish to start?"

"At your convenience."

"I will be ready just three days from this, and we will start after noon, so as to break the first day's ride for you."

"I will see to it that you have every convenience for your comfort on the way, and as my own cook goes along you know that is a guarantee of good living."

And so it was arranged and carried out, for the old troop of Major Canfield pushed out of Fort D— just three days after, with Lieutenant Cole in command.

There had been prepared for Mrs. Silvester and Marcelite all to make them comfortable on the trail, a Sibley tent with folding cots and camp chairs, all packed on the backs of one large mule, and an extra supply of provisions, many of the officers contributing to the store delicacies from their own larders.

It was a sad day for Fort D— when the command departed, carrying with it the "sunshine and moonlight of the fort," as one romantic young officer put it referring to Miss Monastery and Mrs. Silvester, and one and all envied Major Canfield and Lieutenant Cole, while the latter felt a pang of jealousy that the major should be along and muttered:

"Why could he not have gone with one of the other troops and I had full charge?"

The first halt was made at the stream where Wild Bill had found the wounded Indian, and the major gave orders to the scouts that the trail each day should be an easy one, not starting too early, an hour's halt at noon, and an early camp at night, so as to gauge their movements accordingly so that good camping grounds could be found.

The Texan having shown Major Canfield on the map he had drawn, about where his ranch was situated, two scouts were sent on ahead to locate it exactly, and the morning of the third day out the command came upon the rise that overlooked the valley and brought the old Mission into view, with its adobe chapel and surrounding cabins, its prairie dotted with cattle and horses, and all presenting a scene of peace and comfort for that far-away borderland of danger and savages.

CHAPTER LVII.

SKELETON OF THE RANCH.

MAJOR CANFIELD had, when one of his scouts reported that the ranch was not many miles ahead, told him to ride on and give his compliments to Mr. Valdos and request that he would allow them to halt over night upon his domain.

The scout had ridden rapidly, had crossed the ford, and as he rode at a gallop for the hacienda had been met by Adrian Valdos himself, to whom he delivered the major's message.

"I will be pleased to accommodate the major and his party," he said, and the scout thought that he detected a cloud upon his brow in spite of his words.

"There are ladies along also, sir."

"Ah! may I ask who they are?"

"Colonel Monastery's daughter, and Mrs. Silvester, wife of Captain Seldon Silvester at Fort D—."

"Then I must brush up my old quarters to receive them."

"The ladies have their tent, sir, and I believe the major only wished the privilege of camping on the ranch."

"No, they must be my guests."

"But how many are there along?"

"The major, sir, the two ladies and Miss Monastery's maid, the major's negro cook, and Lieutenant Cole, Lieutenant Ross and sixty-six men, not including five scouts."

"Quite a large force, and I am glad they are so numerous, for it is a dangerous country north of here, my man."

"Now return and tell Major Canfield he is most welcome, while I go back and give a few orders, and will meet them at the ford."

The scout took the back trail, while Adrian Valdos rode rapidly back to the hacienda.

Entering his own quarters he found there a man heavily bearded, with long black hair and dressed as a Mexican.

"There are visitors coming and you must not be seen under any circumstances, for there are those along who may recognize you, or suspect your identity at least."

"I am sorry to keep you cribbed up, but I have to ask you to go into the secret room in the chapel, your old quarters, and where you can at least be comfortable."

"I will send you your meals, and when they have gone release you."

"I suppose I can do nothing else; but who are your honored guests?"

"Major Canfield and a troop of soldiers, escorting some ladies northward."

"Ah! going up through the Indian country?"

"Yes."

"Very well, they will not see me, for I will get on my horse and ride out into the hills."

"No, you must not do that."

"I will play cowboy then, rig up as such, and so keep from being seen to attract attention."

"No, you must go into the chapel room."

"Why do you ask this?"

"I demand it."

"And why?"

"Because I read your intention in your eyes."

"What intention?"

"Once you left this ranch and I know what Major Canfield and his troopers might expect, yes, and the ladies too."

"You do read well; but suppose I refuse to go into the chapel chamber?"

"I am armed, you are not, and I swear to you I will kill you if you refuse me."

"Go!"

A revolver suddenly appeared in the hand of the Texan, and it was leveled unflinchingly at the heart of the Mexican.

"Go!"

"I am compelled to do so; but some time there will come a day of reckoning between us."

"My God! has it not already come?"

"Obey me, and quickly!"

The Mexican passed on into the second room, then halted at a door in the solid wall, the Texan close behind him.

The latter stepped forward, opened the door and said:

"Enter."

With a Spanish malediction the Mexican obeyed, entering a walled room some ten feet square, with the light of only one narrow window in it.

The door was of massive oak, studded with iron, nails, and a heavy lock was on the outer side.

There was a cot, table and chair in the room, and though gloomy it was not uncomfortable.

The door was closed behind him, the key turned in the lock, and placing it in his pocket the Texan walked out of his chapel quarters, and went over to where the cowboys dwelt.

"Rio Grande Ralph, a troop of cavalry camps here to-night, and will soon be along."

"There are some ladies in the party also, and I wish to entertain the whole outfit, so set the boys to work getting dinner."

"There are about seventy all told, I believe."

"Yes, doctor, we'll brace up and make a big spread, for it is a pleasure to meet company."

"Come, pard, a troop of cavalry and some ladies to be our guests, so stir yourselves," cried Rio Grande Ralph, and the four cowboys sprung to obey.

Mounting his horse there, after having made a change in his toilet, the Texan rode up toward the ford, reaching it just as the party had crossed and had halted at the barrier.

He doffed his sombrero and welcomed Major Canfield cordially, then bade the ladies welcome, and turning to Lieutenant Cole, said:

"I am glad to see you, too, Lieutenant Cole, and will be pleased to entertain you and your troop."

"I have not the honor of your junior lieutenant's acquaintance."

He was at once presented, and then riding by the side of Mrs. Silvester, he led the way back to his ranch, all being surprised at the large number of cattle and horses they beheld, and the picturesque beauty of the old Mission which was the home of the man who yet was a mystery to all.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE COMMISSION.

THERE seemed to rest a charm upon the old Mission hacienda, as the party approached it, for it was a link between the far past and the present.

The old chapel, the burying-ground, the adobe huts surrounding it, with the heavy timber, picturesque situation between the rivers, the prairie meadows dotted with cattle and horses, a vegetable-garden and fruit-trees, altogether made up a most attractive scene.

Lieutenant Cole was directed to the timber for a camp for his men, while the Texan led the way to his own quarters for the ladies, at the same time saying:

"I can accommodate you, and your officers, also, Major Canfield in one of my cabins, which are by no means uncomfortable."

In vain the ladies protested that they could occupy their tent, the Texan would not hear to it, and he also requested that the troops should not unpack their culinary outfit, as dinner was already ordered for the whole party.

Entering the quarters of the Texan, Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester were delighted, though the former said:

"To think of his dwelling alone in this old chapel, with its bygone memories and adjoining graveyard."

"It strikes me as just the place to chime in with his humor, for Marcelite, mark my words, Adrian Valdos has some heavy cross to bear in life—his face shows that."

When dinner was announced a table had been spread for six under the trees near the chapel, and, to the amazement of all, there was a fine white cloth, silver forks and spoons, and massive silver goblets for them to drink out of, while decanters of wine stood at each end.

"This does not look like a ranch table, Mr. Valdos," said Marcelite, as she glanced at the china plates, white cloth, napkins and silver service.

"These are relics of a once happy home, Miss Monastery, and the chest has not been unpacked in long years, but I opened it in honor of my guests to-day, while, let me tell you that I unearthed this wine from flagons found in the secret chamber of the old chapel, and doubtless left by the good padres who dwelt here, and all of whom were massacred by the Indians, for such is the story of this old ruin."

"Major, you will find that wine delicious, and you must have some to carry with you."

"My best wishes to you all," and the Texan raised the silver goblet to his lips, all drinking the toast.

The cowboys had certainly shown themselves splendid cooks, for there was a roast of beef, a roast turkey, potatoes, turnips and cabbage from the Mission garden, biscuit, fruit and coffee, and all did justice to it.

The same dinner was set before the troopers, with a tin cup of wine to wash it down, and one and all were delighted with their entertainment.

Expressing a wish to see the old chapel, the Texan said that he would show them through it, yet he felt there was a "skeleton in the closet," a secret of the prison chamber which must be hidden from them.

When dinner was about over Marcelite said:

"Mr. Valdos, will you allow me to propose a toast?"

"With pleasure, Miss Monastery."

Taking from the pocket of her riding-habit a large, official-looking paper, she placed it in his hand and said:

"I propose the health and prosperity of Lieutenant Adrian Valdos of the —th cavalry, United States Army."

"That shall be drunk standing," said Major Canfield, and he added:

"Then congratulations are in order."

All rise, while the face of Adrian Valdos first paled, then flushed, and he seemed for an instant to be deeply moved.

But he quickly resumed his composure, glanced at the commission, and then made a speech that even charmed Lieutenant Cole, under the influence of the good old padres' wine he had been most friendly with.

In a few words the Texan said that he knew that he owed his commission to the good friendship of those whom accident had allowed him to serve, and he appreciated their stamping him with so honorable a brand when he was wholly unknown to them all, but that he would endeavor to let actions, not words, prove how dear was the honor bestowed upon him.

Just as he had finished his very appropriate remarks he glanced up and beheld, through the narrow window in the secret chamber of the old chapel, the burning eyes of the prisoner *pro tem*, fixed upon him.

His color changed and he bit his lips; but otherwise no one observed the emotion he felt, and rising from the table they were escorted about the premises, then through the old chapel, and its story told by Adrian Valdos as he had read it, in an old Spanish diary found in the ruin.

But the secret chamber was not opened, and the skeleton in the closet was not revealed.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE ESCAPE.

AFTER dinner the troopers indulged in a nap, or went fishing in the two rivers, the major with the two lieutenants went hunting with Valdos and the ladies took a *siesta* to rest after their long ride.

As one of the cowboys was passing by the window of the secret chamber he heard his name called:

"Ho, Pard Bent."

"Hello, who is it?"

"Say, Bent, I came in here to escape the crowd, and the chief did not know I was here, so locked the door, so please get the key and let me out, for I am half starved and wish to keep out of sight of the soldiers."

"All right, sir, I'll go through the chapel," and Bent walked away.

Five minutes after he took the key from the hook where it always hung and opened the door. The prisoner met him and asked:

"Can I get to the stables without being seen?"

"I guess so, sir."

"Where is the chief?"

"Gone hunting with the officers, sir."

"And Rio Grande Ralph?"

"He went with them too."

"Well, just get me a bag of food and catch my horse for me and I'll take to the woods until these people are gone."

"They leave in the morning, sir."

"No, I heard the chief ask them to stay several days and they consented to."

"I only wish they would, for it is dull here," and Bent went off to get the horse and traps for the Mexican, the latter slipping out of the chapel and making his way to the adobe stables, where several horses were always kept ready for use.

In half an hour Bent came there with a haversack of provisions and blankets for the Mexican, and his horse being bridled and saddled, he mounted and rode rapidly away.

Crossing the ford, he set off on a northerly trail, while, glancing back toward the hacienda, he shook his fist savagely and said in a voice hoarse with passion:

"I have thwarted you, Adrian Valdos, and now will be the time to strike my blow to avenge the past."

With this he dashed rapidly away through the timber, as though wholly familiar with the trail.

Having rested for an hour Marcelite got up and began to look about the rooms which the

Texan had turned over to Mrs. Silvester and herself.

She saw the painted photographs which Wild Bill had referred to, and gazed long upon the faces, first at the one in Mexican uniform, then at the maiden.

Then she said in a low voice:

"Yes, he has been a Mexican officer, that is certain."

"And who is this beautiful girl?"

"She has a face whose beauty haunts me."

Then she looked over the paintings, and started as she drew the cloth back from the easel, for upon it was a painting upon which the paint was not yet dry.

The scene surprised her, for it was the fight at the hill with the Indians, while above the tree-tops, standing upon the perch the negro had built under her directions, was herself, the form and face, small as they were being perfect, while an addition had been added of the United States flag floating above her, fast to one of the pine stems from which the branches had been lopped.

The scene was stirring, the execution fine and Marcelite saw that it was the work of a master hand, for her likeness was perfect.

"How did he do this, for he was not there."

"Oh Eloise, come here."

Mrs. Silvester came quickly at the call, and she too greatly admired the painting, and wondered as well at its correctness of detail.

The hunters came back before sunset, the troopers had been most successful fishermen and the afternoon had passed delightfully to all.

At supper the new lieutenant asked his guests to remain longer, for they were to start the next morning, but the major thought it best to go on, and so it was settled, the Texan stating that he would direct the scouts thoroughly as to the trails.

Then he said:

"I have a souvenir on frontier life, Miss Monastery, that I would like you to accept, for I will carry it with me to Fort D—and from there pack and send it on."

"Will you all look at it?"

He led the way into his studio, and revealed the painting, at which all expressed surprise and pleasure, Mrs. Silvester and Marcelite showing no guilt.

"Why it is perfect, and you were not there!" said Marcelite.

"No, but Major Canfield told me the whole story when I was at the fort, and I stopped, when I was on my way back and sketched Fort Forlorn Hope and its surroundings, while the Indian battle I have a knowledge of from experience."

"And Marcelite's likeness, for it is perfect?"

"I plead guilty, Mrs. Silvester, to having made a pencil sketch of Miss Monastery when I was with the command for a few days—may I offer it to you?" and he took up the sketch, a very clever piece of work, and handed it to Eloise Silvester, an act on his part that Lieutenant Cole fully appreciated, as he feared that he intended to keep it.

"I accept your beautiful present with pleasure, Mr. Valdos, and appreciate your kindness toward me," said Marcelite.

Then the Texan said:

"As it is night now, and the moon is rising, let me ask if you will have some music, for my cowboys sing well together and have a very fair band."

All expressed their pleasure at the treat in store for them, and the Texan walked toward the adobe cabin when Rio Grande Ralph met him and said:

"Did you let him out, sir, for I took him his supper and he was not in the secret chamber?"

"My God! he has escaped, and that means a great deal, Ralph, yes, it means a great deal," said the Texan earnestly.

CHAPTER LX.

AGAIN AS GUIDE.

A TALK with the cowboys soon revealed the innocent offender, in Bent, who explained just how he had allowed the prisoner to go free, believing that it was just as it had been reported to him.

As the Texan had only told Ralph of what he had done, asking him to carry the prisoner his meals, he could not blame Bent, so said no more about it, and bade the cowboys come over to the chapel and give his guests some music.

They readily obeyed and were encored time and again, the soldiers applauding them loudly.

Then Marcelite got out her guitar and sung several ballads, when Mrs. Silvester said:

"I wish your father was here, Marcelite, to sing with you my favorite duet."

"You refer to 'Bonita Don't Say No', Mrs. Silvester?" asked the major.

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps Mr. Valdos sings it, for it is a Mexican ballad," suggested Marcelite and Cameron Cole frowned.

"I do know it, for there was one I used to sing it with," said the Texan, and he added:

"Perhaps we can make it a dual accompani-

ment also, Miss Monastery," and he took up Rio Grande Ralph's guitar.

They struck the chords together, then the Texan played the air, Marcelite accompanying, and the beautiful ballad was begun, at once commanding a dead silence.

The beautiful voice of Marcelite, full of melody, and the rich, flexible, sympathetic tones of the Texan's voice blended together in most perfect harmony and charmed all.

They were encored the moment the last words were sung, and afterward a general demand came for other songs, and it was found that Adrian Valdos knew many that Marcelite sung, greatly to the regret of Cameron Cole who felt that this singing together was very dangerous.

"That fellow is too fresh, Ross, and when he gets into the army there will be no living with him, I fear," he muttered to his junior who sat near him, and who answered:

"Fresh? Why I think he is as modest as a girl, and I like him, and will wager high he will become the lion of his regiment, Cole."

"You are young yet, Ross, only a cub, so do not understand," retorted Lieutenant Cole, disappointed in the sympathy he had hoped to receive.

When at last it was time to retire the Texan said:

"Major Canfield, with your permission I will act as your guide for several days."

"Gladly, sir."

"I thought that your orders were to report at once to the fort, Mr. Valdos?" said Lieutenant Cole.

"So they are, sir, but I shall disobey them in this case, as I deem it necessary."

"A bad beginning for an officer, to disobey orders," muttered Lieutenant Cole.

"I have been honored with a commission, sir, but have not yet accepted it, and when General Carr understands the cause of my delay, he can withdraw it if so it pleases him."

"He is a thorough disciplinarian and will do so," the lieutenant replied.

"Pardon me, but General Carr is just, as well as being a good disciplinarian" was Marcelite's answer, while Major Canfield remarked:

"You have some motive in thus changing your plans, Mr. Valdos?"

"I have, sir."

"May I ask the reason?"

"Well, sir, as we all travel the same trail, I beg to say that I have knowledge that Indians in considerable force will be upon it, and my motive is to guide you by trails that will completely elude them, for you wish to take no chances of a battle."

"You are right, sir, and to satisfy Lieutenant Cole's qualms of conscience about your disobeying orders, I will, as your superior officer on the field, and knowing what is best, order you to act as our guide as far as it is deemed necessary for you to go."

Adrian Valdos saluted promptly, and replied:

"I will be ready, sir, and suggest that we make an early start for reasons I need not explain just now."

This being decided upon "taps" was sounded by the chief bugler, and in a short while the whole camp was as silent as the little cemetery by the church, while lieutenant Cole was metaphorically speaking, kicking himself and muttering to himself:

"I don't know why it is, but it is like shaking a red rag at a bull, for me to be near that Texan."

"I will open my mouth and every time I do I put my foot into it."

"If I expect to progress with the fair Marcelite, I must let up on Valdos; but so I say every time, and then go to pieces when the occasion arises for me to put a bit in my mouth."

"I have heard it said, Cole," sleepily said Lieutenant Ross from his blankets, "that one talking to himself is talking to the devil."

"No, I am talking of the devil, Ross, but don't bother me."

"That is just the request I was about to make of you, for it is time to go to sleep," and the lieutenant yawned as though to emphasize his words.

Cameron Cole "talked no more to the devil," but whether he went into the same peaceful slumber that his junior officer did was a question he alone could answer.

The notes of the bugle awoke all at dawn the next morning, and when the sun was just an hour high the command pulled away from the hacienda, Adrian Valdos ahead with two of his ranch cowboys accompanying him.

CHAPTER LXI.

DODGING A FOE.

THERE was no doubt but that Major Canfield was very glad that the Texan was going along as guide, for he had felt a trifle nervous about going through the Indian country with scouts who had, so to speak, to feel their way.

The men were glad also, for they had perfect confidence in the ranchero, and even Cameron Cole, deep down in his heart, felt relieved of anxiety by the Texan's assertion that he would go as guide.

The men knew of the commission being received by Adrian Valdos, and saluting him as an officer, congratulated him upon his having won it, for they were more in sympathy with him, as they looked upon him as having risen from the ranks as it were.

The Texan left Rio Grande Ralph and two cowboys in charge of the ranch, and when the start was made had ridden to the front the same as though he was under pay as a guide.

It was not very long before Major Canfield joined him, and as they rode along together he said:

"Valdos, you have had some good reason for changing your plans as you did?"

"I have, major, I frankly admit, and I will explain to you, in confidence, why I did so, or rather let you know what prompted me to do so."

"Not unless you desire to, Valdos; though what you tell me shall be received in strict confidence."

"I feel that, sir, and I have to thank you for much kindness to me, and I owe it to you, and Colonel Monastery, that I received the commission Miss Monastery brought to me."

"You owe it to your own valuable services, Valdos, though Colonel Monastery pressed it hard in your favor, and I lent what influence I had, while let me tell you that many prominent names went on the petition, and Wild Bill personally wrote the President in his characteristic way, begging him to make you a captain."

The Texan laughed at this, and said:

"Dear good fellow."

"There is a remarkable man, Major Canfield, that same Wild Bill."

"A man with the courage of a lion and the heart of a woman, a man to do and dare any danger, and as true to a friend as he is to a foe."

"When you see him please present my kindest regards to him, and tell him that I know the President considered his letter, but that I'll have yet to win my spurs as a captain."

"They won't be long off your heels Valdos, at the pace you travel."

"I only hope army life will not spoil you; but now to the reason for your being our guide?"

"Ah yes, sir."

"When I learned of your coming I had one here whom I felt I could not trust, and so I made a prisoner of him."

"Yes."

"Who he is matters not; but I neglected to tell all of my men that I had put him in the secret chamber in the old chapel, and seeing from the window one of them pass yesterday afternoon, when we were away, he told him to unlock the door and let him out, that he had gone in there to take a nap, and not knowing it, I had locked him in."

"Poor Bent, the man on the right behind us, obeyed and let him out, and when I discovered it last night I at once decided that I should go as your guide."

"You expect him to be treacherous?"

"I feel certain, sir, that he rode directly to Gold Bonnet's village last night, and is now at the head of several hundred warriors going to ambush on our trail."

"Then it resolves itself into getting by his place of ambush before he arrives there?"

"No, sir, he will get to the place ahead of us, and I am also certain that he will send a second force to another trail, in case we should not take the one he is on."

"Yes, and you can reach the second one before his band?"

"No, sir."

"What then?"

"I intend to go through by other trails."

"Ah!"

"Or rather where there are no trails, for I know the country well, and in fact dodge the Indians."

"A good idea indeed, and I feel confidence in your doing so."

"I believe that we can also, sir; but the ladies will have to put up with a little hard riding and few halts, late camps and early starts, for in a few miles more I shall set a brisk pace for you to follow."

"I will explain it to them and give the men a hint also what to expect," and the major rode back to again join the ladies.

When he told them what they might expect both at once said they would put up with any hardship, and the men hearing that the Texan felt that there was danger and would push them hard through the country, were perfectly content to stand all he put them to, and a short while after Major Canfield rode again to the front, for the hard riding pace had begun.

CHAPTER LXII.

OUT OF THE LAND OF DEATH.

LIEUTENANT COLE could not, to save his life, resist making an ill-natured remark, when he heard why the Texan said he had come as guide, for he said:

"Bosh!"

"He only seeks more glory, and I do not believe we will see even the photograph of an Indian."

"Having gotten a lieutenantancy now, he has already begun to work for a captain's rank."

"Are you not doing the same, Lieutenant Cole?" calmly asked Marcelite.

"Yes, but not under false pretensions."

"In what has Lieutenant Valdos offended?" with an emphasis upon the title.

"I dislike striving to make much out of little—What is it, sir?" and he turned to Major Canfield who had called to him.

"Keep your men well up, and ready for action, for the guide has just crossed a trail, not an hour old, and of several hundred ponies."

"We are not on the regular trail, as you have doubtless seen, so that those whose trails we have seen are hurrying on to ambush us on the way we would have gone."

"See, we are crossing the trail now."

There was no denying the fact that they were crossing a very fresh and large trail, and Marcelite remarked dryly:

"How much would you make out of that little trail, Lieutenant Cole?"

The young officer felt the sting of her words, for he had hardly said what he did about the Texan making much out of little, when they came upon the large trail.

Two hours after they came to a halt in a valley where camp-fires were still burning, and to them and from them led a trail even larger than the one they had crossed some distance back.

"It is just this way, Major Canfield," said Adrian Valdos joining the party at lunch:

"This trail comes from a village some miles from old Gold Bonnet's village, and these red-skins are moving to an ambush upon the lower trail."

"That other one we passed came from Gold Bonnet's village, and it, as I told you, was going to an ambushing place upon the upper trail."

"They approached the ambush from the other side, and reached there before sunset, so that they can be in position should you get that far in your first day's travel, or on hand the next morning when you went through."

"Now we are flanking both points of ambush, have crossed both trails, and our plan is to push ahead with all speed and travel until late into the night, starting again early in the morning."

"That will put you beyond all danger of pursuit, unless some stragglers may be following those two bands of Indians, see our trails, and report that we have eluded them."

"In that case it becomes a chase?"

"Yes, sir."

"With a good start for us."

"Yes, sir, in either case."

"Well, we will stand the ride and push our horses as hard as we dare."

"I have hope, sir, that no stragglers will come along and discover our trail crossing the others, for in that case we get a night's start almost, as they will not expect you until the morning, doubtless, to fall into their trap."

"I hope that it may be so indeed."

"May I ask, sir, how they knew of our coming?" asked Lieutenant Cole.

"You may, sir."

"Will you tell?"

"It is a matter of Lieutenant Valdos's own affair, Cole," said the major.

"Ah!"

"I will answer you, Lieutenant Cole."

"The Indians learned it through the escape of a prisoner I had at my ranch, after you arrived there."

"Was he an Indian?"

"He was not, but a Mexican, and escaping, and a friend of the Comanches, he went to their villages to get a force to head us off."

"It was when I learned of his escape that I decided to be your guide, for no one else could guide you by the way I am now taking you."

"You know this country well indeed, Mr. Valdos," and there was a certain suspicion in the tone in which the words were said.

"Yes, I have had reason to learn it," was the calm reply.

Lunch being over, and the horses having had an hour's rest, the command once more started, this time prepared for action, for the ladies, non-combatants and pack-mules were in the center, the guide and one of his two cowboys far ahead, the other far astern, with the scouts of the troop on the flanks.

The pace set was a good one, and Major Canfield soon rode forward and joined the guide, who said:

"No report yet from my man in the rear, sir, so I hope we will go through without our passing being discovered until the morrow."

"I hope so; but will not the red-skins know that you alone could guide the command through by this way, for there is not the faintest sign of a trail the way you are going?"

"No, sir, for I will go at once to Gold Bonnet's camp in search of my prisoner on my way back, and so avoid suspicion falling upon me, while the Indians do not know that your scouts could not guide them through where there is no trail."

"Is the pace too hard, sir, for the ladies?"

"No indeed, for they do not mind it."

"We will slacken it soon, sir, and if we get into the night without pursuit there is no danger further."

"That is good news."

"If the ladies were not along I would like to halt on the trail and await pursuit, just to give another lesson."

"We are too near their villages, sir, for that, for they could overwhelm us."

"By the other trails it would be different," and the remark told the major just how great was the danger they were in.

But night came on, and no word of alarm came from the rear, a halt was made for several hours, and once more the march was continued, another halt being made before dawn.

Then came a rest of several hours, and after a ride up to noon, the Texan said:

"You are safe."

"Now I will have to leave you, for you are in the direct trail now, only do not camp long at a time until another night has passed."

Farewells were then said, and as the command moved on, they saw the Texan and his two comrades turn back on the trail that once more led them into the land of death.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A STRANGE DEMAND.

LEAVING Major Canfield to continue on to the north, which he did in safety, making the travel easy, once they had left the dangers that were greatest behind them, the Texan and his comrades started upon their return to the ranch.

Cunning as an Indian, the Texan did not go back the way he had come, but went by a trail that would lead him to the place of ambush which the Mexican had doubtless chosen for himself.

They arrived there to find the ambush deserted, but there were the trails of the Indians to and from the spot.

They had been disappointed, their foes had evaded them, so they had gone back to their village.

Along this trail went Valdos and his men, and it led them to the village of Gold Bonnet.

The chief received the Texan with a grunt of satisfaction, and told him how Elmo the Mexican had come and gotten his warriors to capture a party going through the Comanche country, and though two bands of braves had been sent out, they had escaped.

"And where is the chief now?" asked the Texan.

"He has gone back to see you."

"And I came here to find him," was the answer.

After inquiring after the wound of the chief, the Texan told him that he was going far away, for perhaps a long while, and had come to bid his red friends good-by.

Soon after he took his departure with his two comrades, and when he reached his ranch Rio Grande Ralph told him that the Mexican had arrived the day before him and was in a very ugly mood.

"I expected that, Ralph," and so saying Adrian Valdos entered his quarters.

There sat the Mexican, his eyes glaring furiously, and he said savagely:

"You made me your prisoner, but I escaped you!"

"Yes, so I learned."

"Where have you been?"

"I just came from Gold Bonnet's village."

"What did you go there for?"

"Partly to see you, partly to bid him good-by."

"You did not find me?"

"No, he told me you had come to him and gotten two bands of red-skins to attack Major Canfield's command, but you had missed them."

"Yes, Rio Grande Ralph said Wild Bill was their guide, so of course he eluded me."

"It was well that they had some one along who could, for you have no more mercy in your soul, for a man or woman, than has a snake."

"Thanks."

"But you said you were going away?"

"I am."

"Going to leave me the ranch?"

"No, Rio Grande Ralph remains in full charge."

"I can live here, I suppose?"

"And constantly stir up strife?"

"No, I had hoped that you would not return here from Mexico again and was surprised and pained when I saw you arrive the other day."

"You will yet run your head into a noose."

"It is my head."

"Granted, yet I would save you from such an ignominious death."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to the Northwest."

"What for?"

"I do not care to tell you."

"I can tell you."

"Well?"

"I heard all that was said at your dinner that day, saw all, for you forgot that you had shut me up in the secret chamber and the window overlooked you."

"Well, what of it?"

"You hold a commission in the Army of the United States?"

"I am proud to say that I do."

"A first lieutenancy."
 "Yes."
 "You intend to go to your regiment?"
 "Yes, I start to-morrow."
 "Where do you go?"
 "I report at Fort D—."
 "I have this to say to you?"
 "Yes."
 "You must resign that commission."
 "Resign it?"
 "Yes."
 "I will not."
 "You must."
 "Never!"
 "If you do not I shall dishonor you in the army."
 "You do not dare make the attempt."
 "Do I not?"
 "No."
 "You shall see, if you do not resign that commission."
 "I shall not resign; I start to-morrow to begin my duties, and I shall try to win honor and fame as an officer."
 "I shall wreck your hopes, and I shall ruin you."
 "Do your worst, and then perhaps I may be driven to act."
 "I do not heed your threats, for I have nothing to lose."
 "But, will you resign?"
 "I will not."
 "All right, I will no longer fret you with my company."
 "Good-by."
 "Where are you going?"
 "To the Northwest."
 "I shall utter no word to stay you."
 "Go, and do your worst."

The Mexican turned toward the door, hesitated an instant, and then taking his rifle and weapons, from where they hung on the wall, left the room.

Going to the cook's cabin he got a haversack full of food, then mounting his horse he rode away from the hacienda, and away from the ranch, disappearing over the distant hills.

"He will not dare keep his threat," said Adrian Valdos, when he saw him depart, and he went on about his work of preparing for his departure.

He packed up the painting for Marcelite, and told Rio Grande Ralph when next he went after supplies, and with cattle, to take it with him and ship it as directed.

The rest of his treasures he left as they were, and leaving Rio Grande Ralph in full control, he mounted his horse the next day, and leading a pack-animal bearing his traps, he bade good-by to his faithful comrades and set out upon his new career.

CHAPTER LXIV.

UNDER A CLOUD.

TIME has passed away since the departure of Adrian Valdos to enter upon his new career as an army officer.

He had gone to Fort D— as ordered, explained his delay, and had been most cordially welcomed into the army.

Then he had started for his command, going via Washington with dispatches, and was given a leave of a month before reporting for duty.

The manner in which he was welcomed at Fort Blank, commanded by Colonel Monastery, must have gladdened his heart, for Major Canfield, Captain Lane and even Lawrence Cole, bade him welcome into the soldier life they all loved so well.

Then there was Marcelite Monastery to greet him, Mrs. Silvester, and a host of new friends to tell him they were proud to know him.

It was but a few months before he began to make himself felt as an officer, and in several skirmishes with the Sioux he had greatly distinguished himself.

Rumor had it that he was striving hard for a captaincy, for there was no captain to his company, its commanding officer having been killed in a battle with the Sioux a short while before.

This left Adrian Valdos acting captain, and the fact that he had risked his life to bring his commander from the field, was greatly in his favor.

But the wound was mortal and the captain never spoke after being brought into camp by the courage of Lieutenant Valdos.

With several instances of such conspicuous bravery all felt that it would not be long before two bars adorned Adrian Valdos's shoulder-straps.

It was whispered too that he had won the heart of Marcelite Monastery, but could not persuade that young lady to name a day when she would marry him, she asserting that she would not be married until she arrived at the voting age of a man.

In time the promotion of Adrian Valdos came, for another instance of conspicuous courage made him in truth commander of his company.

Then it began to be whispered around that the young officer was losing his popularity.

He gambled heavily, and though it was said that he was rich, he was backward in paying his debts.

Major Canfield and Captain Valdos were no longer fast friends, in fact had never been intimate after a few weeks' stay of Valdos at the fort.

He was severe with his men too, and in fact many things began to be whispered against him.

"I told you so," was Lieutenant Cole's comment.

"You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and I knew it was not in him to be the gentleman."

"He has become spoilt, and those that got him into the army, are now just as anxious to get him out."

"Why Miss Monastery still tolerates him, and Colonel Monastery too, I cannot understand for the life of me."

So mused, and said Lieutenant Cameron Cole, and he was delighted in his heart that his prognostications had come true, that the idol was shattered, for each day was Adrian Valdos losing his friends.

At last the ugliest rumor of all came, to the effect that Adrian Valdos had once been a Mexican outlaw, that he was not a Texan, only pretended to be, and had come to Texas because he could not live in Mexico.

It was when those rumors got whispered about that Wild Bill arrived at Fort Blank, having gone there to start upon the trail which he had pledged me he would see the end of.

He had wished to start out from the very beginning, and so had gone to Fort Blank to do so.

His first duty was to get hold of all the rumors against the captain, and then to call upon Colonel Monastery.

He found that officer most glad to see him, and he gave him the warmest of greetings.

"I have a letter from your pard, Wild Bill, telling me that you have given your pledge to him to track down the life of Adrian Valdos, the officer who is so disappointing all those who were his friends."

"Yes, colonel, as you know, I am acquainted with all the facts, and I know the trails he was going to travel before he entered the army."

"I owe him my life, as many of us do, so I wish to see justice done him, and for that reason I desire to get at all the facts, and then start for Texas."

"Why go there?"

"I shall go to his ranch, sir, and begin at the beginning."

"I see."

"Rio Grande Ralph knows him as he is, I am sure, and I shall seek him and get at the truth of the past of Captain Valdos."

"I leave all in your hands, Wild Bill, and something tells me you will solve the mystery that hangs over this strange man."

"I wish you to see my daughter before you go, and remember that I pay all expenses, and success will make you a rich man."

"Expenses you can pay, colonel, but not a dollar of your money will I ever take for saving your beautiful daughter from a man who is what they say Captain Valdos is," was Wild Bill's decided response.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE COWBOY'S CHARGE.

WHILE not a soul in Fort Blank suspected that there was a watchful eye upon Captain Adrian Valdos there was nevertheless, for Lieutenant Cole was constantly watching for some special act that he could put his hands on that would result in the overthrow of the man he really hated, for his prejudice had turned into hatred.

The charges that were made against Valdos were as idle as the wind, so long as they merely came as rumors.

It was said that he did this, that he did that, but no one yet had had the temerity to go directly to the colonel and make a charge that he had been guilty of acts that should bring him before a court-martial.

There were former friends that treated him coldly, but of this Adrian Valdos did not seem to care, going on in the even tenor of his way wholly undisturbed by actions, comments or criticism.

But at last the ugliest rumor of all was heard, and even those who had come to dislike him laughed at this.

It was in effect that before he had become a Texan ranchero he had been the chief of a band of Mexican outlaws.

The story had its foundation in this way:

A wagon-train had camped near the fort, and Lieutenant Cole went there to look at some horses, for he heard that they would sell several fine animals they had.

A cowboy brought several up for inspection, and one of them the lieutenant at once took a fancy to, and said that he would take.

"Another officer liked him, sir, but would not pay me my price, so I would not let him go," said the cowboy.

"Who was it?"

"The officer with him called him Captain Valdos, sir."

"Ah, yes, I heard he bought a couple of horses from you this morning."

"He did, sir, and jewed me down on both of them, so that I got but little profit."

"I have three left, and if I could sell them I would like to get a place at the fort, for I am pretty sure I have seen that officer before that I spoke of."

"Ah, and where?"

"I'm a Texan, sir, and I lived not far from the Rio Grande border; but was wiped out one night by a band of Mexican outlaws, led by Elmo the Butcher as they called him, and so I took to going with wagon trains and trading and selling horses for a living."

"I don't wish to make any mistake, sir, or speak against an officer, but that captain is the very image of the outlaw Chief Elmo."

"Indeed?"

"He is, sir, though of course it could not be, for he has been in the army a long time."

"No, he has been in the army a short time only."

"When was it you saw this Elmo?"

"Several years ago."

"And Captain Adrian Valdos looks like him?"

"Yes, sir, he is the very image of him."

"Captain Valdos claims to be a Texan, but I have always thought that he was a Mexican."

"He looked it sir, and he looks the outlaw Elmo too."

"You know this Elmo well?"

"I was his prisoner for a week, sir, and then made my escape."

"He used to wear a mask even before his men, but I saw his face time and again."

"Where is the outlaw chief now?"

"His band was wiped out by a troop of soldiers, sir, but he escaped, and I heard that he had gone into Texas and settled on a ranch, somewhere on the edge of the Comanche country."

Lieutenant Cole's face flushed and for a moment he was silent, for thoughts crowded thickly upon him.

At last he said:

"My man, can I trust you?"

"You bet you can, sir."

"Then I will buy this horse now, and you take him to my quarters, or rather to Captain Valdos's quarters by mistake."

"Take a good look at the captain, make no mistake now, and come back and tell me if you really have seen him before, and when and where."

"Note his face, his bearing, height and all, for I want no mistake."

"I'll be careful, sir," and the cowboy horse-trader went up to the fort with the horse and called at Captain Valdos's quarters to ask him if he wished one of the other horses at the price he had named.

"No, get out."

"You robbed me on the horse I did get from you," was the surly response, and the cowboy returned to his camp.

Soon after Cameron Cole appeared and asked.

"Well, did you see him?"

"I did, sir, and if that man is not Elmo the Mexican outlaw chief I will give you the rest of my horses," was the determined reply.

"I do not wish you to give your horses to me, for I have decided to buy them, and at the price you offered."

"Does that leave you afoot?"

"Only the animal left that I ride, sir."

"You said that you would like a place in the fort?"

"Yes, sir, if I could get one."

"Well, as I have five horses now I will want some one to look after my stable, so I'll strike a bargain with you, if we can agree on terms."

"I want thirty dollars a month, sir, and grub."

"All right, I'll give it to you, and more too, for I have other work for you to do."

"I'm your man, sir."

"I do not wish you to make any charge against Captain Adrian Valdos, but he has lately entered the army, and nothing is known about him, so if he should be playing a deep and double game, for the honor of the service it should be known."

"I wish you therefore, to simply drop a hint now and then, that Captain Valdos is the image of the Mexican bandit Chief Elmo, and in little ways among the men allow the rumor to get out that he is suspected of having been a leader of outlaw raiders before he entered the army."

"If he should be guilty, if he should be Elmo the Mexican, he will, when he believes he is suspected, take flight, and by watching him closely you can know where he goes so be able to trail him."

"Now what do you say?"

"I'm your man, sir, and I'll do it."

"Then take your other horses over to my stable and I will pay you the money for them, and tell my servant that you are now in my service."

"Yes, sir," and the cowboy packed up his traps, bade the people of the train good-by and

went to the fort with the newly-purchased horses, and in a few days the ugly insinuations began to be heard that the past life of Adrian Valdos had not been what it should have been, and that it was said he was really a Mexican and had once led an outlaw band.

As for Lieutenant Cole, he was desperately in love with Marcelite Monastery, and had vowed to himself that she should be his wife, for though he had a small fortune, he wished to add to it by marrying a rich wife, and besides, he really was in love with her.

He was madly jealous of Valdos, and in fact every one else who went near her, and his having put a spy on the movements of a brother officer he excused under the plea that he was doing right to rescue Marcelite from a sad fate, and to throw out of the service one who was a disgrace to it.

CHAPTER LXVI.

UNREQUITED LOVE.

THOUGH Marcelite Monastery was admitted to be, beyond all dispute, the reigning belle of the fort, there was no one there who could exactly understand her.

Beautiful, rich, accomplished, a brilliant woman, and fascinating in the extreme, she became at once the admiration of all.

Young officers sought to win her, for they fell in love with her at sight.

Several officers of maturer years, who were widowers, became infatuated with her, and sought to cheer their desolate quarters by winning her to preside over them.

Even two or three who were avowed bachelors, had decided to become Benedicts if she would only return their love.

Other maidens, strange to say, were not at all jealous, or envious, for she won women as she did men.

Her devoted friend was, of course, Eloise Silvester, and that lady enjoyed Marcelite's triumphs as though they were her own.

"To think of any of them winning you, Marcelite, unless it be Major Canfield, for he is a man worthy of any woman," said Mrs. Silvester, as they sat talking together one day in the pleasant sitting-room of the colonel's quarters.

"Yes, Major Canfield is worthy the love of any woman, and when he does marry, he will make his wife very happy," said Marcelite.

"Did you ever think that it was in your power to become Mrs. Major Canfield?"

"No! is it?" and Marcelite looked really startled.

"It is."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"I am sorry, for I would not pain him for the world."

"Yes, Marcelite, he loves you devotedly, and I would be glad to see you his wife, and I know that your father would also."

"He is not a poor man, for I learn that he has an income that trebles his pay, and so is not after your money."

"I can feel that, but I do not love him and never can."

"I wish that he was my brother, for I could lean on him so, and love him well, but not otherwise."

"Well, there is Cameron Cole."

"Do you mean it?"

"As I do that he has asked you a dozen times to marry him?"

"I did not think he was in earnest."

"Why you surely do not contemplate him seriously?"

"No."

"Then why do you say that you did not think he was in earnest?"

"Simply because I did not see how he could believe that I could love him."

"I see."

"He is handsome, entertaining, and I have heard is well off; but a man who is so prejudiced as he could never win me, had he every other virtue on earth."

"You know that he would not, will not yet, admit there is good in Captain Adrian Valdos."

"Ah! now there is a man I felt sure that you would love, once you knew him well, and yet you do not seem to care for him in the least."

"You are mistaken, for I do care for him, but I wish to explain to you Eloise just how it is, if you will let me do so."

"Yes, indeed."

"When I first saw Valdos, guide though he was, I felt that he was a man to win any woman's heart."

"I found that he was educated, refined, courteous and with a bravery that nothing could daunt."

"I began to make a hero of him, yes, an idol."

"I met him again, the night he came to the fort, you remember it, and had he asked me to have gone with him then I would have followed him to the uttermost parts of the earth."

"You remember our third meeting."

"Yes, at his ranch."

"Well?"

"I still hold that same regard, and yet I was not sure that he was not a married man."

"He entertained us in such a courtly manner, was so gentle, so kind, his voice when he sung with me that night out in the moonlight, under the shadow of that old ruined chapel, which was his home, won me completely."

"I felt that I could be perfectly happy dwelling there with him, cut off from all else in the world."

"Yet, Eloise, not by word or look had he shown that he cared for me."

"His conduct toward me was the same as his conduct toward you, for I could see no difference."

"Nor could I, save in one respect, Marcelite."

"What was that?"

"His eyes, for he never looked at me as he did at you."

"Well, we parted, as you remember on the trail, when we again owed him our lives."

"Then I began to dream dreams of his coming on here, and I believed that I would win him, and I was happy, so happy that I even felt commiseration for the young cub officers who will make duds of themselves."

"I felt at peace with all the world."

"Then he came and I awoke."

"I loved him, yes, and I did not love him."

"He showed me then that he cared for me, and yet I did not feel the same."

"He asked me to be his wife, before he had been two months at the fort."

"And your answer?"

"Some day in the future, I may, but that gives you no claim upon me."

"I wish first to know my own heart."

"And thus it stands to-day, Eloise, though I begin to feel somehow, my idol is clay—wait and see."

Mrs. Silvester could not but see now just how matters were with Marcelite and Captain Valdos, and she said:

"And to me he is also changed, Marcelite."

"Yes, greatly changed, or I have."

"My father wishes me to marry him, but I shall wait."

"Well, I would much rather it would be Canfield, poor fellow."

"Why he told me that he knew that you did not love him, sweetly as you treated him, and said that he would never worry you with protestations of a love that he knew was wholly unrequited, but that he would hide it away in his heart and live in the future as he has in the past, hoping that some day your counterpart may cross his path and allow him to win her."

"God bless him, but he is a noble fellow, and I only hope that some day he will get the good, true wife he deserves," said Marcelite, earnestly.

CHAPTER LXVII.

WILD BILL'S MISSION.

It was just one month after leaving Fort Blank, that Wild Bill descended the hill one pleasant afternoon, by the trail that led to the ford across into the old Mission Ranch of Adrian Valdos.

Things looked about as they did when last he was there, the cattle dotted the prairie valley between the rivers, and as he neared the ranch there was smoke curling up from the chimney of the cook-cabin, giving the traveler a hope of a good supper.

Wild Bill's stern face was haggard, and his horses, for he had a led animal with his camp outfit, looked tired, for they had had a long, a very long trail of it.

As he neared the timber in which the old Mission stood, Rio Grande Ralph saw him and came forward to meet him.

The greeting was cordial on both sides, and going to his quarters the Texan at once made Wild Bill feel at home.

The other cowboys greeted him too as though glad to see him, and after a good supper they all sat down for a chat.

"How goes it here, pards?" asked Wild Bill.

"All right, thank you, only the Comanches are not as friendly as they once were."

"Indeed, what is the reason?"

"Well, they got provoked at the doctor for some reason, and though they have done us no harm, they yet have not been near us."

"That is not a great cause of worry, I suppose?"

"Oh, no; for they have made raids upon the settlements, have had fights with the soldiers, and are generally in an ugly mood, for they let us know that none of us would be allowed to go into their country, but if we remained on the ranch we would not be molested."

"I think they are angry with the chief for going away."

"It may be."

"Now, Wild Bill, how goes the world with you?"

"All O. K."

"I left Fort Blank a month ago."

"And came through the Indian country?"

"I did."

"You saw no red-skins, then?"

"I did."

"Comanches?"

"Yes."

"Many of them?"

"I met two separate bands of them."

"Saw them close?"

"Talked with them as well as I could."

"How did you do it?"

"Just played the game you taught me, with the *serape* and my hands up and back turned."

"And it worked?"

"You see I am here."

"This is strange after their sending an Indian here to warn us, as they did, not to go into their country."

"It is strange; but maybe they have changed their minds, for I came through in great shape."

"So it seems."

"But you saw the chief at Fort Blank?"

"Oh, yes."

"Did he know you were coming here?"

"He did not, but others did."

"And now may I ask why you have come?"

"I will tell you."

"I am here to ask you, as man to man, something about your friend and employer, the ranchero?"

"Well, what do you wish to know?"

"Let me tell you first why I ask."

"Yes."

"You know that Colonel Monastery got him his commission in the army?"

"Yes."

"And Miss Monastery brought it to him?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Now, he went to Fort Blank a hero, a lion, and he had it all his own way."

"He was popular with all, spent his money free and soon got a chance to make a name for himself, and was not very long in gaining a promotion."

"Yes, he is captain now, he wrote me."

"Do you hear from him often?"

"Twice a year, when he writes me to send him the money for the sale of his cattle."

"But, let me tell you that it was not long before he began to be disliked."

"That is strange."

"Well, he began to play cards, and it was whispered that he was not always particular in his methods."

"I cannot believe that."

"Well, it is so."

"Then he began to be more and more severe to his men, he would be very lax in paying his debts, and all of those who had been his friends cut loose from him."

"This is a remarkable story, Wild Bill."

"It is a true one, for I did not come this far to lie to you."

"You have more to tell?"

"Yes, you know that he is anxious to marry Miss Monastery?"

"I thought that he was sweet on her."

"He was, and I really believed she loved him, for she promised some day to be his wife."

"But now she keeps putting it off and it is not known just what she will do, though her father and friends fear she will marry him."

"Now, I am here, pard, to find out all I can about that man, for nothing is known about him, and if he is a villain I ask you as a man of honor to tell me, for that sweet girl's sake, for now it is whispered that he was once a Mexican bandit."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

RIO GRANDE RALPH'S STORY.

WILD BILL had spoken earnestly, and Rio Grande Ralph and the others were impressed by his words and manner.

At last the Cowboy Chief said:

"Pards, I guess I had better make a clean breast of it."

"Yes," was the answer in chorus.

They talked together for some minutes, and then Rio Grande Ralph said:

"Wild Bill, the captain has always kept a secret which we never considered that we had a right to tell, for he has been as true as steel to us!"

"Have you known him long?"

"About six years."

"Where did you know him?"

"I met him in Mexico."

"What was he doing there?"

"He was in the Mexican Army, a captain of cavalry or lancers."

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"Then he is no American?"

"Oh, yes, he is an American."

"His mother was a Mexican lady of distinction, his father an American, a man of wealth and position; and it is her name that he bears to-day."

"His father, as I understand it, lost his fortune, and the wife returned to Mexico with her two children, and she resumed her maiden name in order to get possession of some property she could not otherwise claim."

"She got one of her sons, Adrian, a position in the Mexican Army, and he was then just twenty, having returned from Europe where he had been at a university studying medicine and also studying art."

"He made a dashing officer, but remained in the Mexican Army only to please his mother, for he wished to return to America."

"Meeting a young lady cousin she fell in love with him, and he returned her affection, so that they became engaged.

"They were about to be married, when she was captured by Mexican bandits and he never saw her again, for it was said that she took her own life.

"Soon after wild stories got afloat of what the young captain was doing, and it was said that she had made her will, for her property was in her own right, and he had himself been the bandit chief that kidnapped her, his act driving her to suicide when she knew him as he was.

"Then it was said that he had run through with his mother's fortune, and broken her heart.

"At last the rumors of his evil deeds became so frequent that he was forced to resign, and he left Mexico.

"Then came the story that he had turned bandit in earnest.

"One day the bandit chief was captured and sentenced to be shot, when up comes Adrian Valdos and begs for his life, for it was his brother.

"It was this brother, Elmo, who had gone to the bad, had stolen Adrian's bride, had sent his mother broken-hearted to the grave, and who had been the wicked one through all.

"Of course all felt then how cruelly Adrian had been wronged, and he was offered a regiment in the Mexican Army, if he would accept it.

"But he refused, and failing to get pardon for his wicked brother, he plotted his escape and rescued him the very day before the one appointed for the execution.

"He brought him to Texas where he had established this ranch, and tried to make an honest man of him.

"Captured by the Comanches, at a time when there was an epidemic in their tribes, he did so much to cure them that they ever after were his friends.

"It was when they set him free that he established his ranch here in their country.

"But his wicked brother took advantage of this friendship of the Indians to use it to his advantage, for he went to Mexico and organized a band of outlaws, which became known as the Black Hats."

"Oh, yes, I know them."

"Well, you know how the captain saved Major Canfield from the Indians and aided him to put an end to the outlaw band."

"I do indeed."

"That he saved the life of the outlaw chief, Elmo, and now you know why."

"Yes."

"Well, the chief came here and gave his brother money to go away, to leave him forever."

"But back came Elmo once more, and had not Captain Valdos guided the troops through the Indian country they would have been massacred."

"And where is this man now?"

"He left here the day before Captain Valdos did, and we have not seen him since, nor do we wish to see him again!"

"I should think not."

"But is it not a pity that Captain Valdos is showing the cloven foot now?"

"I suppose it runs in the blood."

"I can never believe it, for he is one of the noblest of men."

"Were these two brothers alike?" asked Wild Bill, with a suddenness that startled the cowboys.

"Alike?"

"Well, I should say they were."

"They were twin brothers, and were of the same height, size and build, while I could never tell them apart until Elmo let his beard grow, and then he had gotten into a habit of wearing a mask."

"Pards."

"Yes," cried all in chorus, for they saw that Wild Bill was deeply moved, and he was a man always serene and quiet.

"You say that the man Elmo left here the day before the captain?"

"Yes."

"Did he know that his brother had received a commission?"

"Oh, yes, for he heard it all."

"Then, pard, you may use me for a target if I do not believe that Elmo, the bandit, killed his brother Adrian, assumed his character and is the one now pretending to be Adrian Valdos, for I tell you he struck me as different from the man I had known here."

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE COMANCHES' CAPTIVE.

THE words of Wild Bill, the bold assertion that he made, startled the five cowboys, bringing them all to their feet.

Rio Grande Ralph was the first to speak, and he said:

"I do not believe, bad as Elmo is, that he would kill his brother, for he told me once if he did he would never believe he would have luck, for he said so one day after the two had had a scene."

"What about the report that Indian courier gave us, but which we took no stock in?" asked one of the cowboys.

"Oh, yes, that Captain Valdos was in Gold Bonnet's village and would stay there; but knowing he had gone to Fort D—we knew that he was lying."

"See here, pard, I do not believe that he was lying, for if Elmo the bandit would not kill his brother, he might get rid of him by taking him to the Indian village and saying that he was a traitor."

"I am going to see that old Gold Bonnet, and knew the truth."

"But, Wild Bill, we have an idea that the captain could take care of himself against any man."

"Not against treachery, Rio Grande Ralph."

"I have an idea, and I am going to strike its trail, so I start for the Comanche village tomorrow."

"You take big risks."

"I am used to them, and go I will."

"Then I go with you," was Rio Grande Ralph's firm response.

So it was resolved upon, and at once arrangements were made for an early start, for Wild Bill said that he was not in the least tired, and only needed a fresh horse.

The next morning the two, Wild Bill and Rio Grande Ralph, started off for the Comanche camp.

They were well mounted, carried a pack-horse each, one loaded with presents for the Indians, and bade their comrades good-by with the air of men who meant to do or die.

It was the next day at noon when they reached the Indian village, and they saw at once that something of importance was taking place.

They were received by the Indians coldly, but held right on to the chief's tepee, and they discovered that old Gold Bonnet, the head chief, was dead.

The Indians were just preparing to bury him, and with respectful mien the two comrades followed to the grave the remains of the chief.

After the burial, Eagle Wing came up and greeted them, seeming particularly glad to see Wild Bill, who had once so well befriended him.

He wore a chief's bonnet now, and very soon let it be known that he had so greatly distinguished himself that he was to be chief in the place of the dead Gold Bonnet.

He led the two pards to his tepee, and then Wild Bill began to bestow upon him the presents they had brought with them.

Eagle Wing was more than delighted, and when Wild Bill told him that they had come for an important powwow, he readily granted them the right to speak.

Wild Bill was the spokesman, and said:

"We are on the trail of the Lone Medicine Chief."

"He is here."

Both men started, their eyes flashing with joy.

"The Lone Medicine Chief disappeared from his ranch long moons ago," continued Wild Bill.

"We have mourned his loss, for his wicked brother, the Mexican chief with the crooked tongue, has lied against him, and is now a big chief in the army of his pale-face foes."

Eagle Wing seemed surprised at this, and Wild Bill continued:

"Let the great chief Eagle Wing tell us why the Lone Medicine Chief is here?"

"The Eagle Wing speaks straight."

"The Mexican chief told the Gold Bonnet that the Lone Medicine Chief was going to join the white braves, and asked for some warriors to go with him and capture him."

"The Gold Bonnet gave him his braves, and they laid in ambush and captured the Lone Medicine Chief and he was brought to the Comanche village."

"The Mexican chief said that he must not die, but the Gold Bonnet must keep him a prisoner, and he is here."

"Eagle Wing, that Mexican chief is an immortal liar, and he is now the traitor to the Comanche, the Lone Medicine Chief is your friend."

"He has saved you and your people."

"What has the Mexican chief ever done for you or your people?"

"You loved the Lone Medicine Chief, he loved you."

"You are a great chief, your people respect you, they believe in your wisdom, in your words."

"Tell them how the Lone Medicine Chief has been wronged, and set him free that he may return with us to his ranch."

"The white hunter talks straight."

"The Eagle Wing does love his white brother, and he shall be free."

"The Eagle Wing is chief now."

With this he called his braves about him and made a short, eloquent speech, at the end of which he sent to have the prisoner brought before him.

Almost a wreck of his former self, Adrian Valdos entered the tepee, started at sight of Wild Bill and Rio Grande Ralph, and the next moment he clasped a hand of each, for Wild Bill said:

"We are here to save you, pard, and don't you forget it."

And Adrian Valdos did not forget it, for new life seemed given to him, and when Eagle Wing told him he was no longer a captive, he said he was ready to start at once on the trail to his ranch.

But it was decided to await until the next day and this was done.

Two days after the ranch was reached, and after a week spent there to recuperate, Wild Bill and Adrian Valdos took the trail for Fort Blank.

CONCLUSION.

It was a long trail to Fort Blank, for Wild Bill set the pace, and he was determined that Adrian Valdos should not break down on the way.

But a free man once more, with hope again in his heart, he recuperated rapidly, and just two months after his rescue by Wild Bill, he rode with his rescuer into Fort Blank one night.

Muffled up well he went with the scout to Colonel Monastery's headquarters and asked for a private interview.

The colonel came in, Adrian Valdos arose, throwing aside his cloak, and starting back the commandant cried:

"What! you alive, after Major Canfield's report that he saw you fall dead from your horse?"

"I am sorry to see, Adrian Valdos, that you are alive, for I was in hopes that the report was true, that you had been killed by the Sioux in the last battle."

"And you, Wild Bill, bring this man back alive?"

"Colonel Monastery, you are under a wrong impression, sir, for the man whom you believed to be killed was my twin brother, Elmo Valdos, known as Elmo the Mexican Bandit, while I, his victim, for he has been impersonating me, am Adrian Valdos, for a long, long while a captive of the Comanches."

Colonel Monastery could hardly believe that he was awake; but when Wild Bill told the whole story of his long and successful trail, then there was no doubt, and the welcome Adrian Valdos received he never forgot.

Then Marcelite and Mrs. Silvester were called in, and they heard the long, strange story, and the Texan was welcomed as though from the grave, and he was told how his brother had been killed in battle only a few days before.

Then all who knew Adrian Valdos recalled how different indeed had his brother been, and after a long consultation together, in which Major Canfield was called in, it was decided that the officer should be the colonel's guest that night and the next day the true story should be told.

And it was told, and then Lieutenant Cole said that he had received a letter from Mexico, from a cowboy who had seen the twin brother, and he had said in it that he had once been an outlaw chief in Mexico, and the story had thus gotten around about him, along with many others.

"I am glad that the end of my poor brother was as it was."

"Peace to his ashes," Adrian Valdos had said, and his name was not again mentioned, while the real hero was indeed the lion of the fort.

But he felt it his duty to resign his commission, and did so, though he gained a wife by his act, for he led to the altar Marcelite Monastery, whom he had loved even more dearly than he had his Mexican sweetheart who had met so sad a fate.

Leaving Fort Blank Adrian Valdos and his bride were escorted to the nearest stage station by Wild Bill, who to the day of his death was their dearest friend, for he had nobly kept his pledge and gone to the end of the trail which had known so much of wrong, of hardship, of sorrow, and last, but not least, was crowned with joy.

THE END.

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